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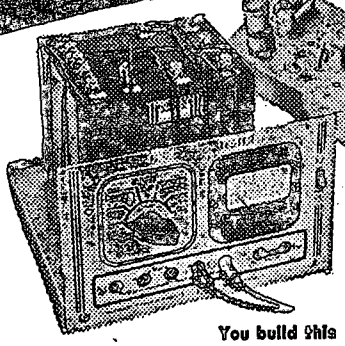

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THE Sarge truly didn't know you-all cared (you-all is used in its correct plural sense for the sake of our sub-Mason-and-Dixon readers). At least, the literary *(ouch!)* extent of your emotional fixations regarding him came as an overwhelming surprise, overflowed two drawers of his desk and has him generally screaming for mercy.

Opinions were mixed. Some 341 involuntary devotees—why don't they turn to something else?—wished to abolish your astral agent, complete with by-line, Xeno, space-gremlins and bad puns. A total of 326 cheered for more Xeno. And 239 of our alleged readers voted for various modifications which would retain the Sarge but eliminate their own pet peeves. Most of these edged toward bitterness on the bad puns.

We're Stringing Along

While never, never, a believer in moderation ourself, we have long since given up supporting anything but the underdog. So, and this was the idea all along, we are stringing along with the middle-of-the-roaders and, as previously stated, modifying the Sarge. But when and if a bad pun occurs to us, we shall throw it as a sop to the multiple majorities.

At any rate, the postwar Rubicon is cast, the bed is buttered and we shall lie in it—lie and lie and lie. Let the Sarge eat cake—he goes for it in his present abstemious condition. But if any of you is moved to send him one, put a file in it.

The Defense of Bergey

With such minutes passed into hours, we intend to launch ourselves upon the most controversial issue since we did an Off-to-Buffalo upon the ashes of the late adjective-crazy Howard Phillips Lovecraft. The Sarge is finally rising to the defense of Earl J. Bergey.

It seems curious that a group of readers as zealous toward their varied interests as the bulk of those who contribute to THE ETHER VIBRATES should concentrate such a large percentage of their cerebral acumen upon the BEMs and hussies who populate our covers.

After all, the purpose of such a magazine as SS is to give its readers stories of the highest obtainable calibre within the field of its endeavors. Such lamb-chop lace panties as illustrations and covers are more or less catsup for those who cannot take their filet mignon straight. So for Pete's sake, when delivering your broadsides anent our unendearing and not-so-young charms, concentrate your venom on the authors, not the artists—and remember to rattle three times, please.

Actually, Earle Bergey is one of the most versatile and highly polished artists engaged in the design and painting of magazine covers today. His knowledge of anatomy, composition and color rate him in the front rank of the topnotchers.

And, brother hyenas, he can draw a pretty girl!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

DO YOU want to know what it would be like to live in a United States devastated by an atomic bomb attack? Would you like to have to "take to the heather" like the adherents of Bonnie Prince Charlie in Scotland two hundred years ago after the Forty-five?

Probably not—but you're going to find out. In THE LAWS OF CHANCE, a full length novel by Murray Leinster which will appear in our next issue, you will get a graphic description of such a gopher-hole existence which should linger a long time in both conscious and subconscious minds.

Steve Sims was a professor of physics at a major university before the bombs began to strike. Brilliant and scientifically learned, he knew a great deal about the forces that

(Continued on page 8)

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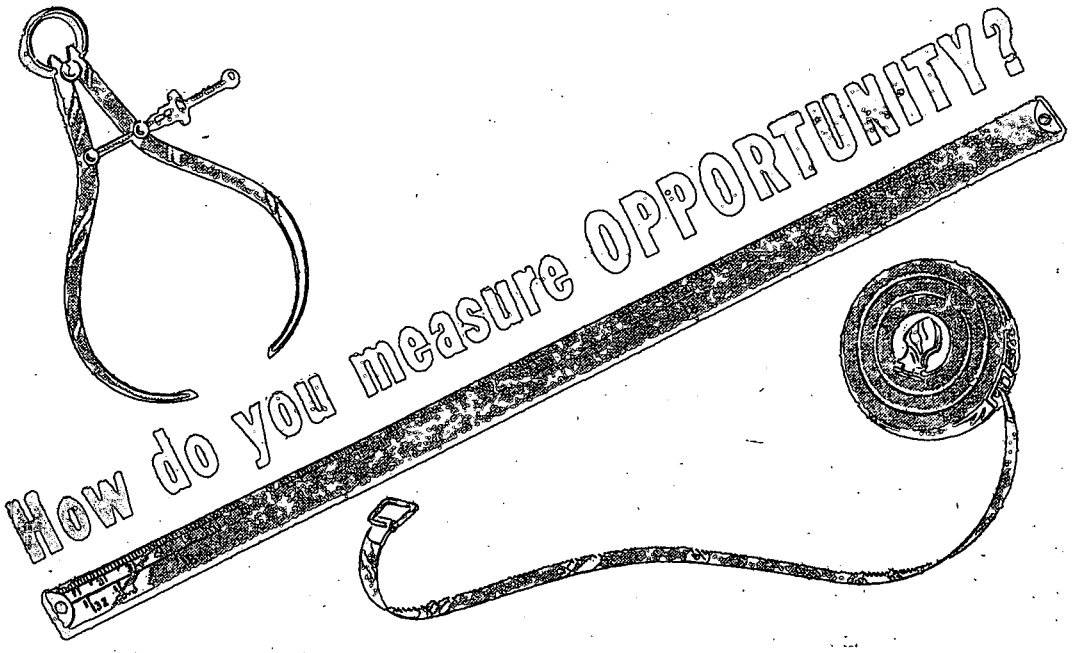

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

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Furthermore, it will be followed in the issue after next by a sequel, THE DISC-MEN OF JUPITER, which inaugurates a new if occasional policy of running semi-serials in the Hall of Fame. Mr. Wellman, incidentally, who is very much alive and practising, as readers of this magazine know, last year won a prize for the best short detective story of the year. A versatile Joe.

And the short stories—those editor's headaches and reader's delight, to step on—will be up another notch. Keep an eye out for a new writer who combines the ironic satiric viewpoint of Saki with the hard-hitting genius of Leigh Brackett. Her name is Margaret St. Clair, and few of you will forget it once you have read her work. It's different—which is all we can tell you. You'll have to do the rest for yourselves.

ETHERGRAMS

WINNOWING through the terrifying amount of what's-to-do-with-the-Sarge mail, we have come upon a number of letters which, to us, seemed well above the average with which this column is swamped bi-monthly.

First on the list, as it should be, is a note from a war veteran lying wounded in a California hospital.

(Continued on page 10)

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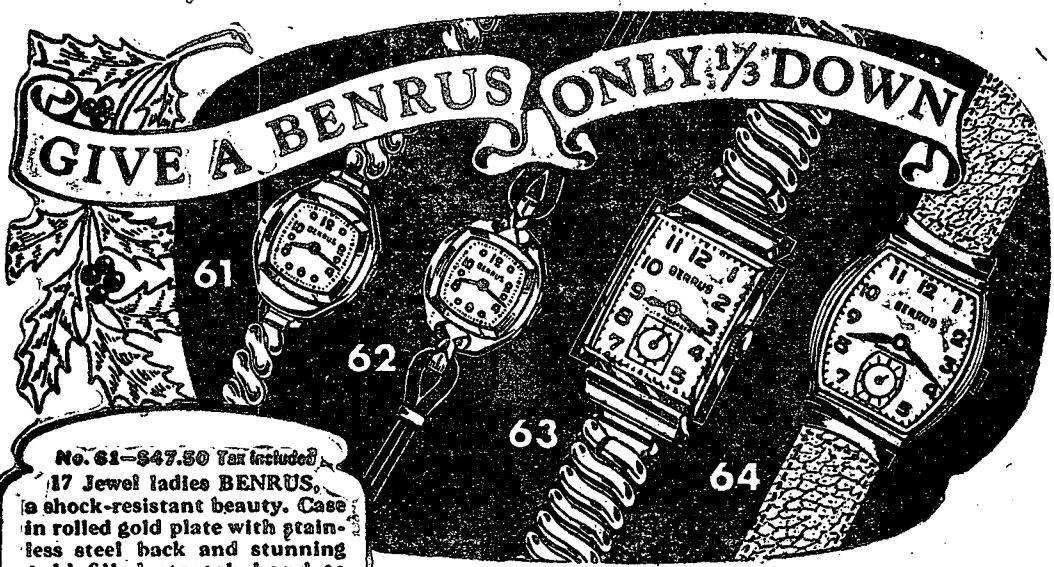

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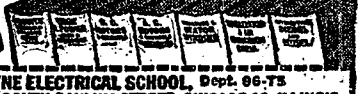

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

So, in the words of Portland Hoffa, "Shall we go?"

WRITE TO THIS MAN
by Fred G. Michel

Dear Sarge: Just finished reading the July issue of STARTLING STORIES and each story was very good, especially THE MAN WITH X-RAY EYES. There is more truth than poetry in that story. The letters were very interesting and the comments after each missive equally so.

As they sell your magazine in the PX here, it will be my own fault if I miss the September issue. I am looking forward to AFTER ARMAGEDDON. Would not mind reading a description of that future battle. As it gets lonesome here, I would not mind getting mail.—*Veterans Hospital, Ward 4, Palo Alto, California.*

Okay, people, do your stuff.

GWANOFLOPPO
by Chad Oliver

Dear Sarge: It sends pangs of righteous agony lancing through my weary soul to admit, in this age of sarcastic culture and left-handed compliments, that I—*I, the Green Gwanofloppo*—was actually stirred by a story. Yet such was the case as I explored *The Dark World* with HanKuttner. That, Saturn old man, was great stuff.

It was perhaps a mistake to compare Kuttner with Merritt, because any comparison to Merritt invariably places something of a handicap on the person compared. After all, Merritt was . . . Merritt. (That is indisputable fact, I assure you.) And, while some of his work was far from great, Merritt at his best was just about unbeatable. *The Moon Pool* and *Creep, Shadow!*—these were rare fantasy thrills.

But, since the comparison has been made, I shall recklessly fling my two coppers into the seething pot. Kuttner, at times, *did* write very much like Merritt—witness Chapter Two. And the characters of Medea and Arles were very Merritt-like. But Kuttner is too fine a writer merely to ape The Master; the best parts of *The Dark World* were distinctly his own. And at no time did he copy Merritt.

So much for comparison, dat ol' debbil. The characters in *The Dark World* were splendid—all of them. The writing was startlingly (free plug) good. The one and only exception I will take with the tale is the attempt to explain everything with science. Fantasy should be just that, in my opinion. But it was a minor point; it didn't hurt the story to any great degree, and perhaps it will keep the anti-fantasy-we-want-space-pirates mob silent.

The Dark World was a sample of how fine stfantasy can be; I look forward to the time when these "samples" the patient reader runs across become the standard bill-of-fare. Leave us face it, Sarge—I like Captain Future and his cohorts, and so do lots of other people, but his era is drawing to a close. Kuttner, Ray Bradbury, and others like them point the way.

The Summer STARTLING had very little else besides the Kuttner novel (not that it needed anything else) to offer in the way of fiction. Hamilton's Hall of Fame tale had a good idea, as did Cross' *Vicious Circle*. Neither were very well written. Rocklynne's *Extra Earth*—a poor title—had a nice thought, and the usual competent Rocklynne writing. Vance's *Planet of the Black Dust* was . . . *well!* SPACE PIRATES! Oh *goody*. Science-fiction marches on.

And now for Art. (Who laughed?) The cover looks like a cross between Robin Hood, Snow White and Buck Rogers, but it's pretty fair for all of that. I see that Bergey has reverted to his technicolored-doughnut gun again. The pix for Kuttner's epic—by Lawrence, I assume brashly—were fine, especially the first one. Sarge, I would give a fortune for that original. You, too, can be rich—wealthy beyond your wildest

(Continued on page 98)

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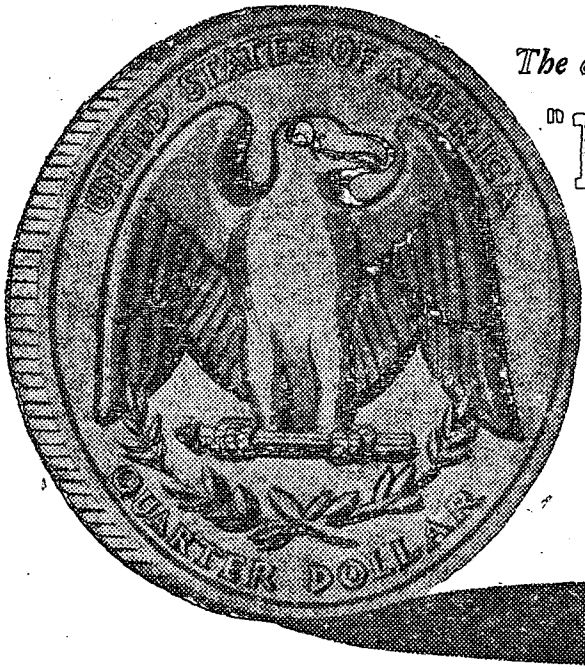

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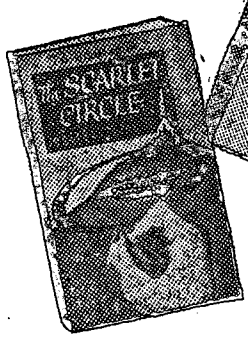

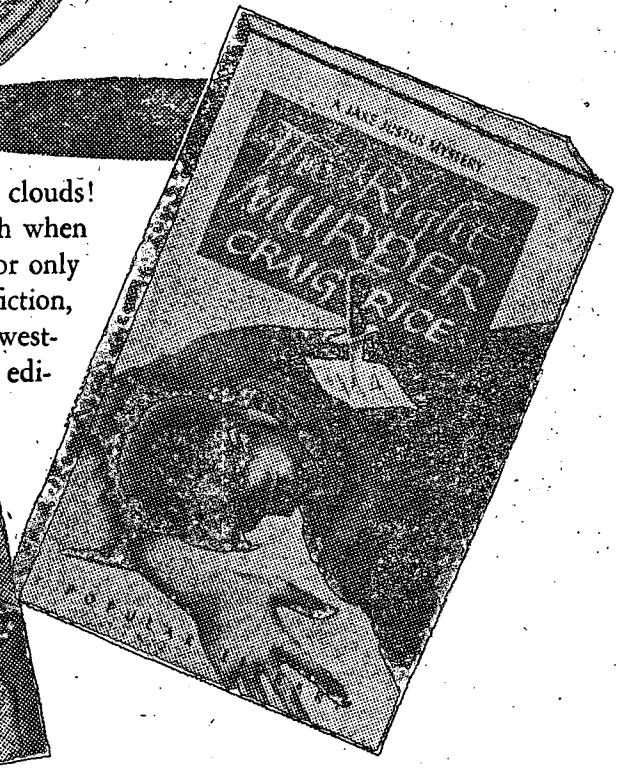

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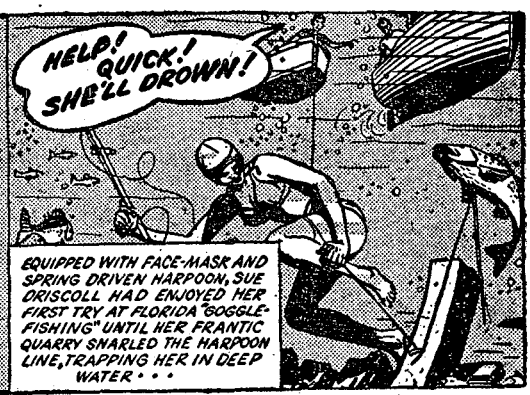
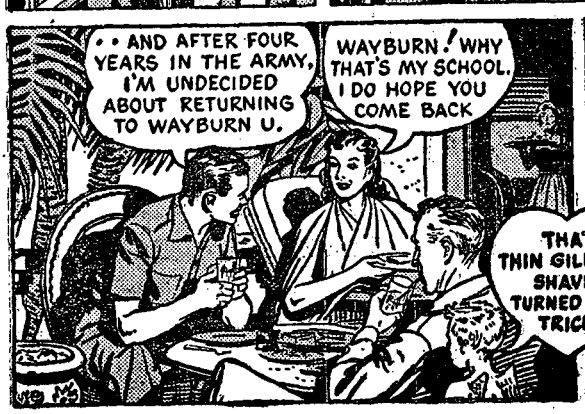
JIM DIVED INTO TROUBLE BUT THEN...


HELP! QUICK! SHE'LL DROWN!
EQUIPPED WITH FACE-MASK AND SPRING DRIVEN HARPOON, SUE ORISCOLL HAD ENJOYED HER FIRST TRY AT FLORIDA "GOGGLE-FISHING" UNTIL HER FRANTIC QUARRY SNARLED THE HARPOON LINE, TRAPPING HER IN DEEP WATER...


..AND AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE ARMY, I'M UNDECIDED ABOUT RETURNING TO WAYBURN U.
WAYBURN! WHY THAT'S MY SCHOOL. I DO HOPE YOU COME BACK
THAT THIN GILLETTE SHAVE TURNED THE TRICK

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Hammond's pistol-barrel smashed through the lens as the machine rolled under him (CHAP. XV)

THE STAR OF LIFE

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Kirk Hammond leads a future civilization in a desperate struggle against rule by a minority which derives its power through knowledge of the secret of immortality!

CHAPTER I

Space Doom

HE DIDN'T want to die. It was all very well to talk of facing death with a valiant smile.

A man could do that—at least, it was reasonable to assume that some men could, if they did it before witnesses. The unquenchable human vanity and desire for esteem served to carry them through.

But he, Kirk Hammond, was completely alone, more alone than any man had ever been before. And he had to die. What was worse, he had to do it by his own hand. That is, if he were not to perish in a prolonged animal agony.

"Chin up," he muttered to himself, as he went across the cabin of the little ship.

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"One turn of the valve and it's all over."

It wouldn't work. Hammond couldn't maintain that tone of ironic detachment, here by himself twenty million miles from Earth.

He gave it up, and sat down. With a dull apathy on his dark, haggard young face, he looked around the interior of the little ship.

Sunlight blazing through the ports on one side lit everything in the cabin to brilliance. The flanges of the rocket-throttles glittered like gold, the white tanks gleamed smoothly.

It was very silent. The *Pioneer* was out here in space where there was no air and no sound, and it was gliding smoothly of its own inertia on the vast elliptic orbit that it would follow until doomsday.

Hammond looked dully through the port at Earth. Off in the starry blackness, it was only a faraway, fuzzy little green ball.

He thought of Barnett and the others back there on the Colorado plateau, waiting hopefully for him. How long would it be before the newspapers and television networks would be running stories headed, "KIRK HAMMOND BELIEVED LOST—DARING MARS-FLIGHT ATTEMPT UNSUCCESSFUL"?

There would be others to try the crazy stunt, of course. In the last forty years, ever since World War Two had ended, one rocketship after another had tried for the nearer planets. All kinds of designs had been tried. And not one of them had come back.

Kirk Hammond and his partners had planned something new—a one-man ship. A large crew, they reasoned, meant too much space taken for air and water and food. By making use of mechanical controls, one man would be able to handle the *Pioneer*.

Hammond had won when they had drawn lots for the job. Won what, he asked himself now? A chance for glory, he had thought then. A one-way ticket to nowhere, he knew now.

The *Pioneer* had been good—but not good enough. She had taken off well enough and had been ten million miles out when his instruments had shown a gravitational drift whose existence had not been calculated by the theorists back on Earth.

Hammond had fought the drift. He had fought until his last drop of rocket-fuel was gone, first to break back into his course toward Mars, later to turn back to Earth. But it had ended with his fuel gone and the little ship fixed in an unalterable orbit.

That orbit would take it clear out of the Solar System. It was going out into the darkness and cold beyond Pluto and nothing could stop it. Its orbit was a vastly elongated ellipse, and that meant that somewhere far out there it would turn and come back toward Earth. By the time that happened, he would have been dead a long, long time.

Hammond had spent two weeks in the dead ship, two weeks that seemed an eternity. The food and water were all gone now. The air was almost gone, too. He knew that he would die soon of asphyxiation unless he took the painless way out.

"If I could only send back word of that drift," he thought heavily. "Everybody who tries will run into it. But someday some lucky guy will get through."

BUT there was no way of communication. The Heaviside layer screened Earth, even if he had had a large enough radio transmitter.

Hammond knew what he had to do. He had to open the space-door and let death hit him quickly and save himself a lot of agony.

He went to the door and laid his hand upon the valve. There was a hard, tight lump in his throat, and in his brain the blind will to live was frantically suggesting impossible hopes.

"Don't do it! Don't open the door! Maybe the ship will get out of this! Maybe someone will come in another ship—"

Crazy, impossible, he knew all those fleeting hopes to be. It was only his subconscious putting up a last fight against his reason.

Hammond knew the *Pioneer* would stay in its vast orbit for countless centuries. And nobody would come—it would be years before another ship would try the Mars flight, and even if spaceships got as thick as blackberries out here they'd never find his tiny circling tomb.

Hammond fought down all those ideas. He had to do this thing quickly, or he would not do it at all. He put his hand on the smooth rim of the big valve that opened the space-door, and started turning it.

The door went *pung* and cracked open several inches. The screech of air whistling out of the ship knocked Hammond over on hands and knees. At the same moment, he felt an awful, agonizing sensation of cold.

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Hammond picked up a stylus-like pencil and hastily drew a tiny rocket-ship (CHAP. IV)

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This death was not as painless as he had expected! That was Kirk Hammond's dying thought.

CHAPTER II

Return to Life

HAMMOND awoke slowly, first to a kind of numb awareness and then to consciousness of a screaming, roaring sound. And then all the devils of the pit began sticking red-hot needles of agony into his body.

How could he awake when he had died? That was Hammond's first dazed, bewildered thought. The thing was impossible. Yet he *was* awake.

He was rolling back and forth on the floor of the *Pioneer*. The little ship was corkscrewing crazily, and the screaming sound came from the air that was screeching past its hull and was roaring into the half open door.

"Air? Air out here in space?" Kirk Hammond wondered numbly.

Curiosity is the strongest human trait, in the last analysis. It was what kept Hammond from sinking back into a wretched coma.

He wanted to know about that air. He had to get up, to find out. So he exerted every effort of his will to move.

He couldn't. He couldn't even open his eyes. He was Kirk Hammond, and he was still somehow alive, but his body was a useless mass of flesh that could do just one thing—hurt.

It hurt with sharp, increasing agony. Hammond breathed in jerky, tortured gasps, and each gasp was a fiery sword through his lungs. He would have screamed from that pain if he could have done so.

The floor got warm under him, then hot. Hammond's mind, detached from his helpless, agonized body, figured out in a dim, remote way that the friction of air was heating up the *Pioneer*.

Then he got his eyes open. The interior of the ship was just the same, except that instead of the bright sunlight there was a thin, ghostly starlight for illumination.

Hammond could see the star-field outside the ports slowly revolving and knew by that that the ship was rapidly turning as it rushed through the air. What did it all mean? He had to get up and see!

His hands and knees would hardly support him when he got up on them. The roaring air that came in through the partly open door was hitting him like an invisible, solid fist.

It was out of the question to try to stand up on the floor of the corkscrewing ship, even if he had had the strength. Hammond crawled toward the wall, gripped a stanchion, and pulled himself up to a porthole.

What he saw hit him a stunning shock. Directly underneath the *Pioneer*, the whole of starry space was blotted out by an enormous, shadowed, greenish sphere.

The gleam of seas and the dark outlines of land were plain as a map on its face. He was no more than forty miles above it. And it was Earth!

"By Heaven, the *Pioneer* returned in its orbit and is falling back to Earth!" cried Hammond, wildly excited and suddenly hopeful.

That was the only explanation. But it didn't explain the biggest mystery of all. It didn't explain why he was still alive when he had died.

Then Hammond began to see how that might have happened. Suppose, instead of being really dead, he had only been in suspended animation? Suppose he had been in temporary coma from the freezing cold of space?

It wasn't impossible. Hammond remembered that even away back in the 1930's, scientists had put men and women into a "frozen sleep", a form of suspended animation in which every cell of the body was suddenly frozen rigid. The quickness of it prevented organic or cellular damage, and the subject could be revived days later by application of warmth.

Maybe that was what he had been in, a deeper frozen sleep? And then the *Pioneer* had come back to Earth, and the air and increasing warmth of the friction-heated hull had gradually revived him?

Hammond was to learn later how nearly correct his theory was. But at the moment, he swiftly forgot it. For he suddenly realized that he had come back to life to die again quickly.

The *Pioneer* was falling at ever-increasing velocity through the uppermost atmosphere of Earth. It would presently hit the surface. And he had not a drop of fuel left with which to brake its fall.

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"If I could use the fins to glide down to a skip-landing—" Hammond said hoarsely to himself.

He crawled toward the pilot-chair. As he strapped in, he felt his brain blacking out from the spin of the falling ship. He fought against unconsciousness. There was a slim chance left if he could stay awake.

The *Pioneer* was equipped with stubby rudder fins to help it land on its return to Earth. Hammond pulled up the tail-fin control. The corkscrew gyrations of the ship levelled out into a steep downward rush.

But the dark land-masses and starlit seas of nighted Earth were still leaping up toward Hammond at appalling speed.

"If I only had fuel to use the brake-blasts for a minute!" he thought hopelessly.

The ship veered left in its downward rush as he twisted the fin-lever. It headed toward the nearest of the starlit seas.

Hammond used the tail fins to pull up the nose of the ship a trifle more. He was praying to clear the dark land and hit the sea at the flattest possible angle. The hull of the little ship was dull red with friction as it screamed down over the dim coast of the land and struck the ocean.

The *Pioneer,* hitting the sea at that flat angle, skidded across its surface like a skipping stone. It was what Kirk Hammond had wildly hoped for—a skip-landing that would avoid a direct crash.

But the skips of the ship were a half-mile each, and each time it came down and grazed along the surface of the water, the crash tore plates and fins loose and flung Hammond against the chair-straps.

Crash—crash—crash—coming at briefer intervals. Then there was a roar of water outside, and next moment water poured into the *Pioneer* in a solid rush as the little ship began swiftly to sink.

That rush of water revived Kirk Hammond a little from the stunning shocks. He fumbled to unbuckle the chair-straps. Even as he did so, the *Pioneer* was sinking like a stone.

Hammond floundered frantically through rushing water toward the door. He got to it and clung to its lip, but couldn't get through it. It was choked by stuff that jammed its opening, cushions and plastic cases and other things that would float.

He made a final wild effort and scraped through. He went up like a rocket through the warm waters, got his head out of the water into starlight and soft air, then gulped sea and went under again.

HAMMOND realized later that he would have drowned then very quickly had not his floundering arms struck something buoyant and floating. It was one of the seat-cushions of the ship. They had been made, like everything else in it, to save weight, and were of rubberoid inflated with helium. Thus they had floated up through the open door.

Hammond got his arm hooked through the loop that had been attached to make the cushion a life-preserver in case of just such a landing. Presently he glimpsed another bobbing cushion and got that also. The two held him up perfectly. He breathed in great gasps for a long time, floating under the bright white stars. Then he began to paddle weakly in the direction of the dark land.

His mind was still as numb as his body was weak. But gradually, lying on his back and urging himself feebly through the water, a strange realization entered his brain. He had been looking up dazedly at the solemn vault of stars while he paddled. And he realized now that there was something wrong with them.

Hammond knew the constellations thoroughly. He had studied them for years in preparation for his flight. And as time passed, he now became aware that their movements were not right.

The northern constellations were in the sky, which meant that he was in the northern hemisphere of Earth. And Ursa Major and Draco and the other northern star-groups were revolving slowly about the celestial pole.

But the pole-star was no longer Polaris. It was a fainter star that he recognized as Delta Cygni, many degress across the heavens from the former polar star.

"But that means hundreds of years have gone by—*thousands!*" thought Kirk Hammond.

The celestial pole constantly changed position in the heavens, due to the phenomenon of precession of the equinoxes. Every twenty-seven thousand years it described a small circle in the north sky.

If the pole was now Delta Cygni, it had described more than a third of that circle. And that meant that ten thousand years had passed since his own time.

Hammond felt the staggering shock of

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this thoroughly incredible realization.

"Ten thousand years!"

CHAPTER III

New Earth

AN ODD thought was uppermost in Hammond's mind. Had he lain in frozen sleep that long in the *Pioneer,* as it followed its vast elliptic orbit out into outer space and back again to Earth? Had he?

The thought was mind-cracking. If that were true, countless generations had risen and died on this planet, races and empires and faiths had flashed forth and blown away like candles in the wind, during that frozen slumber that had seemed so brief to him.

And if that were true, all on Earth whom Kirk Hammond had known were dead for ages, their dust dispersed and their memory forgotten.

"Barnett and Jim Cray and that girl in Pueblo and——"

Hammond quit that. He had to or lose his sanity. But as he paddled weakly on through the warm water, his mind continued to whirl in fantastic speculations. If ten thousand years had actually gone by while he slept, what changes had they brought to Earth? How far had humanity gone in that time?

Hammond had to dismiss that from his mind at the moment, for now the low black line of the land was showing against the starlit sea ahead. He made out jagged black rocks as he paddled nearer. If the tides had been stronger he would have been dashed against them.

As it was he encountered only subdued surf that sucked him between two craggy boulders and deposited him on a little beach of sand, as gently as a mother would put down a child.

Hammond lay there for minutes, breathing deeply and not thinking. The soft sucking of the surf and the whisper of the breeze were the only sounds. There was a salt-and-dried-weed smell about that was familiar.

Then, finally, he got up. Hanging onto the side of a boulder for support, he looked upward to verify that incredible change in the northern constellations. But as Hammond looked up he saw the firefly lights.

They looked like that—three or four fireflies flitting far out over the starlit sea whence he had come. They seemed to dance and waver, to spin and mill and spread out in an ever-increasing area.

It came to Kirk Hammond that they could not be glowing insects or they would not be visible so far. They must be vehicles or planes of some kind, bearing lights.

A hand suddenly touched Hammond's shoulder. He uttered a strangled cry as he turned. Then he saw that it was a man who had soundlessly approached him on the soft sand.

They stood, eyeing each other. The stranger had recoiled at Hammond's hoarse exclamation, and now stood looking doubtfully at him in the dim starlight.

He was a big, hulking individual with bristling black hair and a massive, cheerful face. He had naive, friendly eyes that were now puzzledly inspecting Kirk Hammond. Hammond gasped in astonishment. Either the dim starlight was playing tricks upon him, or this big stranger's battered, massive face was faintly *blue.*

The man's garments were quite simple, a jacket and loose trousers of dark cloth. He held raised in his right hand a slim gray metal tube with an egg-shaped grip.

The thing looked like a weapon, and the big blue man kept it raised for instant use. Yet he seemed excited, rather than hostile. He spoke urgently to Kirk Hammond, pointing hastily at the distant firefly lights.

Hammond could not understand a word he said. It was not English, nor was it any other language he had ever heard. That as much as the man's outlandish blue skin convinced Hammond that he had actually crossed a great period of time. Any language spoken by a race of his own time would have sounded at least vaguely familiar.

THE blue man seemed bewildered when Hammond showed his lack of understanding. He pointed to Hammond's head, then to his own, then to the few fireflies flickering out there over the sea.

"Vramen! Vramen!" he repeated urgently.

Hammond couldn't get the connection. Yet dazed as he was, he could sense there was a warning in what the other sought to convey. Again the other man pointed to his own head and then to Hammond's—questioningly.

That made Kirk Hammond look at him

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more closely. He discovered that around the top of the blue man's skull was bound a tight-fitting turban of metallic fabric.

"*Vramen!*" yelled the other suddenly, pointing westward.

Hamomnd looked and saw that the fireflies were separating. One still hovered low above a point out on the sea. But the others were quartering eastward over the ocean, searching.

His companion dragged Hamomnd into the shadow of the rocks. He looked up from there and saw one of the fireflies approaching. It was a vehicle that flew silently and at great speed. He could make out a long, transparent hull—the light from inside it, and its darting, searching movements had made Hammond think of fireflies.

The big blue man was frantically unwinding part of his metallic cloth turban, was using a knife to cut at the fabric.

Hammond suddenly heard a voice inside his mind. It was a clear, commanding voice that spoke in his brain, hypnotically authoritative.

"Come from hiding and show yourself!" it commanded. "Signal your whereabouts to us!"

Kirk Hammond, totally without volition, found himself starting numbly out of the shadow toward the starlit beach.

The blue man reached for his ankles and tripped him. As Hammond sprawled, the other hastily wrapped around his head the length of metallic cloth he had cut from his own turban. At once the hypnotic mental command stopped.

Hammond found that he was shaking violently, as though drawn back from the edge of an abyss. The whole swift experience had been so unearthly that he lay there in the shadow, quivering like a hunted animal.

His companion seemed to take it all as a matter of course. The blue man lay looking up shrewdly at the firefly ships that kept darting to and fro, quartering searchingly over the starlit coast.

Hammond began to understand, a little. That mental command had come from the searching ships. The metallic turban was of a material that shielded him from the hypnotic attack.

His companion uttered a grunt of satisfaction. The firefly ships were flying back

Thayn Marden brought the energy-pistol's butt down on the guard's head in a lightning blow (CHAP. VIII)

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out to the one still hovering over the distant sea.

Sitting up, the blue man looked at Hammond. He still warily held his egg-handled weapon, but he seemed tremendously interested. Finally he touched his own chest and spoke.

"Rab Quobba," he said.

Hammond could understand that. He touched and named himself.

"Hammond?" the other repeated, accenting it oddly. He stared puzzledly at Hammond, then pointed east and asked, "Do Rurooma?"

Hammond didn't understand. He made a shrugging gesture to show his ignorance.

Rab Quobba frowned and pointed east again. "Rurooma? Dal Vramen?"

Kirk Hammond guessed he was being asked if he had come from the place whence the searching firefly ships came. He shook his head. Quobba seemed to make up his mind. He stood up, motioned Hammond to accompany him and started southward along the rock-strewn shore.

Hammond hadn't the faintest idea where they were going or who this big man with the bluish skin might be. But one thing seemed clear. The firefly ships were a menace. And Rab Quobba had been friendly, at least so far.

As they moved southward along the starlit shore Quobba kept when possible in the shadow of the great boulders. Weakness made Hammond's legs leaden, and he stumbled through the sand in a gathering daze.

He was aroused by a sudden flash of light, far to the east. It struck down out of the sky like a curved lightning-bolt, leaving a livid fiery trail. As that trail faded, there came a distant, twanging sound.

QUOBBA, in answer to Hammond's wondering look, pointed briefly up at the starry sky and then eastward.

Hammond wondered dazedly. That fiery, downdarting flash had looked like the trail of a descending spaceship. Then men had conquered space by now? Perhaps even interstellar space? But if that were so, why were some men furtively hiding from others?

He was reeling and knew he could go little further, when Quobba finally stopped. They were in the shadow of a towering boulder. The blue man looked carefully around the heavens, then spoke sharply.

A section in the side of the boulder swung inward, disclosing a dark aperture. At first, Hammond thought his eyes had deceived him. Then he realized that the boulder was a hollow, clever camouflage.

Quobba drew him hastily inside. The opening closed, and they were in utter darkness. A globe overhead flashed into light.

Hammond stared. The interior of the huge fake boulder was a small room. There were three other men in it, men dressed also in dark jackets and slacks. Two of them were ruddy, ordinary young Earthmen of his own age. The other man, whom Quobba addressed as Shawn Tammas, was—unusual.

Shawn Tammas was a wizened little man with a wrinkled, golden yellow face and beady black eyes. He had been chewing something and showed green-stained teeth when he exclaimed in wonder at sight of Hammond.

Hammond's dazed gaze swept from the men to the big machine or instrument that occupied much of the room. It looked like a six-inch refracting telescope mounted on a bulbous pedestal, but its tube was of heavy gray metal and instead of a lens at its end it had a flared nozzle.

It looked like a bigger replica of the egg-handled pistol Rab Quobba carried. It might be, Hammond thought, that this was an energy-gun of some kind. He noted a ceiling that could be slid aside above the weapon. This fake boulder might be a camouflaged gun-emplacement.

"But good heavens!" he thought, stunned. "If these are really energy weapons why must they hide from anybody?"

Quobba drew him toward a pit that yawned at one side of the chamber. A narrow spiral stair dropped down this vertical shaft. Hammond went down it with him. The wizened little yellow man called Shawn Tammas accompanied them with monkey-like agility.

There was white light below, and they went down into the light, into a great room or hall that had been squarely cut out of solid rock.

The room was big and lofty. Brilliant white globes in the rock ceiling shed a shadowless illumination. Around the walls were unfamiliar machines, tables of whirring instruments, glittering metal assemblies. This big underground hall was some sort of workshop.

Rab Quobba took off his own and Ham-

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mond's metallic turbans and stuffed them into his pocket. He and Tammas led Hammond forward through the busy rock hall.

There were some two-score people working at the machines. Some were girls who wore brief shirts and shorts. Most of them looked like ordinary, white-skinned Earthmen. But there were a few who looked as unusual as Quobba and Tammas—a couple of stocky men with dull red skins, a lanky, hollow-eyed man with a gray complexion.

Hammond saw their curious, staring faces as though in a dream. He knew that he was nearly out, and would have sunk to the floor if Rab Quobba had not steadied him as he led him across the hall.

Wondering, excited men and girls followed. They went through connecting rock halls to a smaller chamber that seemed their destination. Here were shelves of curious metal-bound books, wall-charts of astronomical diagrams, a couple of littered desks.

"Ez Jon Wilson, lanf do nos Hoomen," Quobba said to Hammond, pointing to the man who was coming toward them.

Jon Wilson was an aging Earthman, his hair iron-gray, his gaunt, strong face and deep eyes those of a leader. He looked at Kirk Hammond with astonishment and quick-mounting anxiety.

There was a girl at his side, slender in her brief garment, her dark hair falling to touch her bare shoulders. In her hawk-pretty face and clear black eyes was an equal wonderment.

"Ez an do Vramen?" she asked quickly of Rab Quobba.

"Nun, Iva!" the big blue man exclaimed. His massive face was earnest as he made rapid explanations, pointing excitedly upward.

To Kirk Hammond it was more like a dream every minute. The whole scene was blurring. He had kept going on sheer nerve, but now the inevitable reaction of weakness was sweeping through him.

A tall, hard-eyed man with sandy hair had pressed forward beside Jon Wilson and the girl Iva. This man was staring at Hammond with harsh suspicion.

"Ez fa Vramen!" this individual exclaimed, when Quobba paused. A low, angry mutter of assent came from the little crowd.

Quobba shook his head in angry denial. "Ez nun, Gurth Lund!"

But the sandy-haired Gurth Lund had drawn one of the egg-handled pistols and his beady eyes were bleak as he raised it toward Hammond.

Hammond guessed that they thought him a spy or ally of the mysterious, dreaded Vramen. And, ignorant as he was of their language, how could he tell them the incredible truth about himself?

CHAPTER IV

After Ten Thousand Years

HAMMOND'S eyes fell upon the astronomical charts on the wall, and a desperate hope made him stumble toward them. Most of the charts seemed star-maps of various regions of the galaxy. But one was a diagram of the Solar System with all the planets depicted in their orbits.

Hammond picked up a stylus-like pencil and hastily drew a small picture on it. He drew a tiny rocket-ship, speeding away from Earth and with the crude figure of a single man visible inside it.

He pointed to the ship picture, then to himself. It did not lessen the hostility of the little crowd. They pressed toward him threateningly.

"How can I tell them that I slept in the ship for many centuries, that I come from the past?" Kirk Hammond wondered groggily.

He reached toward a chart that depicted the northern constellations as seen from Earth, with the crossed lines of the celestial pole at the star Delta Cygni. Hammond drew new crossed lines at the star Polaris. He pointed to that, then pointed again to the little pictured ship leaving Earth and to himself.

Some of them understood at once. Jon Wilson, the leader did so. The incredulity in his gaunt face did not entirely disappear, but there came into his deep eyes an expression of dawning awe.

"Do phrann!" he breathed, he and the girl Iva and almost all the others staring wonderingly at Hammond.

The bleak-eyed Gurth Lund spoke harshly, skepticism strong in his attitude. But big Quobba answered loudly.

And then the whole scene waltzed slowly around Kirk Hammond, as he staggered from the cumulative effects of shock and exhaustion.

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Quobba ran toward him. He and the dark-haired girl supported Hammond. With Jon Wilson leading, they helped him down a corridor into another room.

It was a small sleeping chamber, cut like the other rooms of this strange underground refuge from the solid rock. Hammond felt them stretching him out in a narrow bunk, covering him with a silk-textured blanket. Then sleep overwhelmed him.

He woke with the feeling that many hours had passed. He was weak and limp, but no longer felt that sickening dizziness. He lay for some minutes, looking up at the rock ceiling in which one bright white globe shone softly.

It was all true, then! It had been no dream, that awakening of his in the rocket as it fell back toward Earth after its age-long swing through outer space, that strange hypnotic attack by the firefly ships of the Vramen and his stumbling with Rab Quobba to this underground town.

Quobba himself appeared in a few minutes with the girl Iva. The big blue man's massive face grinned down at him cheerfully.

"Ez nun do Vramen," he told Hammond reassuringly, and then pointed to Hammond's zipper-jacket that hung nearby.

IVA was smiling at him too, though with a touch of awe in her clear dark eyes. And when Jon Wilson came in a moment later to inject medicine of some kind into Hammond's arm, he was reservedly friendly.

They had accepted him, Hammond realized. They believed now he wasn't one of the mysterious Vramen who were apparently their deadly enemies. Something about his jacket had corroborated his strange story.

Then he understood. In his jacket pocket had been the book of mathematical tables he had used in navigational calculations. That printed book of a long-dead past had at least partly convinced them of his incredible assertion that he himself came from that past.

Hammon had picked up one or two of their words and now tried haltingly to use them.

"Nun Vramen," he repeated, pointing weakly to himself. "I'm not of the Vramen." Then he pointed to them. "Nun Vramen?"

Iva shook her head almost fiercely, her mop of blue-black hair brushing her bare shoulders.

"Nun—sin do Hoomen."

Hoomen? That was what these people called themselves? It sounded very much like "human".

Kirk Hammond would have liked to learn more, but Iva pressed him back down on his pillow with firm little hands. She spoke what he knew was a command to sleep.

Sleep was all Hammond seemed to himself to be doing in the next few "days". He was feeling the full reaction from the ghastly shock to his human frame of waking from a frozen sleep of ages.

His weakness only slowly gave way to returning strength. But Jon Wilson and his daughter, for he had learned that Iva was such, would not let him get up.

He spent most of his waking hours learning the language, usually from Iva Wilson. She was a good teacher—she insisted on his first learning a vocabulary from her pictures and gestures, and would not let him ask all the questions with which he was bursting.

Hammond wanted desperately to know more about this strange future Earth into which he had been catapulted. For there were hours when he lay feeling a terrible loneliness, thinking of friends dead for ages, of all customs, languages, nations and races that had been his own Earth and were now gone forever.

Three sleep-periods or "days" had passed before he was able to learn what he desired. By his fourth day in the underground refuge of the Hoomen, Kirk Hammond was sitting in a chair.

On that day Jon Wilson came with big Rab Quobba and the little wizened, golden-skinned man named Shawn Tammas.

"My daughter tells me that now you can understand and speak at least the rudiments of our language," said the deep-eyed leader. Kirk Hammond nodded assent. "And I'm glad of it. There were a million things I wanted to know."

"We hope to learn much from you too, very much," John Wilson said gravely. "Tell me first, is it true what you seemed to be telling us, that you come somehow from the far past?"

"It's true, though I can hardly believe it myself," Hammond said.

He told them of his attempted space-flight and its disastrous ending, of his death-like sleep in space and final awakening.

Jon Wilson's gaunt face showed no signs of incredulity at the story. The Hooman leader appeared to possess considerable

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knowledge of scientific possiblities.

"A catalepsis of suspended animation such as you describe could easily result from the shock of instantaneous freezing," he mused. "And when your ship finally fell back to Earth, the Vramen radiolocators picked it up and that's why they've been searching for you ever since."

"You mean that the Vramen are still hunting for me?" Hammond asked.

JON WILSON nodded gravely. "They are combing this whole coast. We have not dared go forth onto the surface since you came."

"They'll keep up the search too, curse them!" rumbled big Rab Quobba, his massive blue face angry. "They never quit anything."

"Wilson, who are the Vramen?" Kirk Hammond asked tensely. "Why are you hiding from them? And why are some of you so strangely different, like Quobba's blue skin and Tammas' golden one?"

"What, lad, have you never seen a gentleman of Vega before, that you wonder at my color?" exclaimed big Rab Quobba.

Shawn Tammas cackled and spat green juice of the root he was perpetually chewing.

"This youngster must come from the far past indeed, not to know a Vegan and a Mizarian when he sees them."

"Vegan? Mizarian?" echoed Hammond incredulously. "You mean you are from those distant stars?"

"It's true, Hammond," said Jon Wilson. "You come apparently from a time in the remote past when even interplanetary travel had not yet been fully achieved.

"But interplanetary space was soon conquered. And later, interstellar space also was conquered by the invention of the space-split drive that makes almost any speed possible. That opened up the stars of the galaxy to colonization by Earthmen.

"So a great, wide-spread Hooman civilization advanced through many star-systems. It now embraces a large part of the galaxy, being ruled by a government of the Federated Suns."

Hammond was stunned. What tremendous progress had gone on in those hundred centuries in which he had lain sleeping in his ship!

"We Hoomen are all of the same species, all descended from the colonizing Earthmen," Wilson was saying. "But due to different environments, there are differences in pigmentation of our separate star-peoples."

"But if you Hoomen colonized the galaxy, who are the Vramen and why are you hiding from them?" Kirk Hammond asked him bewilderedly.

Jon Wilson's gaunt face hardened and there was a look of bitter hatred in his deep eyes as he answered.

"The Vramen are a small, exclusive caste of men and women scientists who dominate our galactic civilization. They have no official part in the government of the Federated Suns. They are comparatively few in number. And they have made many great scientific discoveries which they have imparted to us Hoomen. But we hate them because they dominate the galaxy through their greatest scientific secret of all—the secret of unlimited life."

Kirk Hammond at first thought the other was speaking figuratively. Then he asked incredulously, "You can't mean—"

Jon Wilson nodded solemnly. "The Vramen are immortal. They never die except by accident or injury. Some of them are four

[Turn page]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

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thousand years old, but their secret of immortal youth keeps them unaging."

The Hooman leader stared gloomily at the wall as he unfolded his explanation.

"It began some four thousand years ago. At that time, certain Hooman scientists were exploring a dangerous cluster of stars in the Corvus region of the galaxy. Upon a mysterious world deep in that cluster, a world called Althar, those scientists found the secret of immortality!

"The discoverers used it to become immortal, and became the first Vramen. They expanded their numbers by taking other chosen men and women to the mysterious world of eternal youth.

"But they would not let the great masses of the Hoomen go there. They jealously guard the unknown secret of immortality there for themselves. For they know that if we Hoomen all became immortal, they would soon lose their dominance over our civilization!

"So far, the Vramen have been able to direct the whole course of development of our civilization because their immortality gives them scientific powers far beyond anything we short-lived Hoomen can attain. But if we could become immortal also, we could end that domination. Why should they live on like immortal gods patronizingly conferring benefits upon us, when we could direct our own destinies if we too lived unlimited lives?"

Jon Wilson's eyes were flaring now, and Hammond saw in his face and in those of Rab Quobba and Shawn Tammas the imprint of strong passion.

HE FELT that same resentment kindle in himself at the picture they painted. A small, exclusive caste of scientific supermen, hoarding eternal youth for themselves to assure their dominance over the rest of the race!

"But if there are only a few of them, why don't you force them to relinquish their dominating position?" Hammond demanded.

"They have powerful weapons like that hypnotic amplifier," Wilson reminded. "Their unending lives give them the chance to amass vast scientific knowledge and powers."

"Then why don't you Hoomen go to Althar and secure the secret of their immortality for yourselves—make yourselves their equals?" asked Hammond.

Tammas' beady eyes twinkled at him.

"This spaceman from the past is a lad after my own heart."

"Shut up, little monkey, and let Wilson tell him," growled Quobba.

"Many Hoomen in the past wanted to do just that," Jon Wilson said, "to win to the mysterious world of Althar and find the secret of eternal youth despite the prohibition of the Vramen. But the Vramen, to prevent that ever happening, have required the Federated Suns council to give them a certain privilege. That was the privilege of keeping indirect control over all interstellar ships.

"Every star-ship, in accordance with that law, has built into it a secret device of the Vramen which can be used to explode the whole ship if it goes into the forbidden region of Corvus Cluster, where the world of immortality lies.

"And also in each solar system there are a handful of Vramen who keep constant check, by means of super-radiolocator devices, over every star-ship that arrives at or departs from that system."

"That's why the Vramen here swiftly appeared to search for *your* ship," Rab Quobba put in to Hammond. "Their radiolocators in Rurooma, Earth's capital, must have shown an unauthorized craft approaching Earth."

"Yes, and that's why the so-and-sos are still combing the coast and keeping us penned down here," grumbled little Tammas.

"All those precautions," Jon Wilson was saying earnestly, "are to make sure that the Hoomen never are able to make a surreptitious attempt to reach the hidden world of immortality. But some of us decided to defy the Vramen and seek out the secret on that forbidden world. We formed a conspiracy to build secretly a star-ship that would be able to reach mysterious Althar."

Kirk Hammond instantly remembered the big underground workshops through which he had come, the machines and metal assemblies.

"You're building your star-ship down here, underground?"

Wilson nodded.

"We have to. It's the only way to keep our work hidden, for we're violating the law and the prohibition of the Vramen. We are all star-ship men and women, with long experience in space. Quobba, Tammas, Gurth Lund, all of us—we formed our plans in Rurooma and secretly prepared this hidden workshop by using energy-blasters to cut

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it out of the solid rock.

"And here we are building a star-ship which will *not* have the Vramen's device built into it. With it, we mean to reach Althar and win the secret of immortality that will make our Hooman race independent forever of Vramen domination!"

CHAPTER V

Peril from the Sky

KIRK HAMMOND'S spirit soared to quick, warm sympathy with this little band of determined men and women who had already proved themselves his friends.

Here was high adventure indeed, such adventure as he had not dreamed of when he had taken off from Earth ten thousand years ago! A forbidden quest for the greatest secret of the starry universe!

But it was more than mere adventure. It was a struggle to release the whole human race from the domination of the little caste of supermen who held their authority only because of their immortality. It was a fight for human rights such as instantly appealed to him.

"I don't know if you'll have me or not, but I'd like to join you," Hammond said earnestly.

Rab Quobba slapped him on the back.

"I knew you'd want to! We can use him, can't we, Wilson?"

Jon Wilson looked thoughtfully at him.

"You are as new to this age as though you had just been born into it. Why should you want to share this danger with us?"

"Because I am already one of you," Kirk Hammond said. "My own world, my own people, are dead ten thousand years ago. I have to take up my life in this new age as one of your Hooman race.

"I come from a time when we hated injustice and fought hard against it. And it is supreme injustice for the Vramen to use the secret of unlimited life to assure their domination. That's why I'm with you heart and soul against them."

"Not that I'd be much good to you, at that," he added ruefully. "I have no knowledge of the star-ships of this time, of your science and machines."

"You have more than that, Hammond," Jon Wilson said quickly. "You have the bold fighting spirit that is rarely found in our race after all these thousands of years of peace. We can use that! And we can teach you about our ships and sciences."

"Can I see the work you're doing on your ship now?" Hammond asked eagerly.

The gaunt Earthman shook his head.

"Not yet. You are still a little weak. Tomorrow I will show you."

Rab Quobba and little Tammas stayed when Wilson had gone, and Hammond plied them with eager questions about the spacemanship of this age.

Both the big blue Vegan and the monkey-like little Mizarian were veteran star-ship men. For hours Hammond drank in their talk of the starways. It was like a dream realized for him to hear them. The dream of complete conquest of space was what long ago had lured him from Earth in the flimsy little rocket-ship.

Hammond's head spun with their tales of spaceman's life, tales of the vast glooms of cosmic clouds that ships rarely dared enter, of wrecks and castaways in the unexplored fringes of the galaxy, of strange races like the thinking rocks of Rigel and the fish-cities of Arcturus' watery worlds and the the unearthly tree-wizards of dark Algol.

Iva Wilson finally chased the two spacemen out of the room when she brought his evening meal of synthetic nutrient jellies and liquids. Iva also brought him word that he had been provisionally accepted.

"They have decided to enlist you as one of us. Only Gurth Lund and a few others argued against it."

Hammond remembered that bleak-eyed, sandy-haired man.

"What has Lund against me?"

"Nothing, personally. But he still was a little suspicious that you might be a Vraman spy. He argued that if you were, you would naturally seek to join us."

"His logic is good enough," Hammond admitted. "But you don't believe it, Iva?"

THE dark-haired girl looked scornful. "Of course not! The Vramen wouldn't use such a weak, helpless person as you as a spy."

Kirk Hammond laughed, and the girl flushed quickly.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way. You couldn't help being weak, after all you went through."

"Save your sympathy," he grinned. "Your

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father says I can get up tomorrow."

On that next day, Hammond found himself a little unsteady on his feet when he first walked out of the sleeping-chamber. But strength came rapidly back to him. He walked with Iva to the small room that was Jon Wilson's study and the heart of the underground project. The Hooman leader was there with Gurth Lund.

Lund came forward promptly with his hand extended, and with all hostility gone from his square face.

"You've been accepted and that settles everything," he told Hammond bluntly. "I hope you don't hold what I said against me?"

"Of course not! If anyone had dropped in on me with a story such as I told, I'd have been as incredulous as you were."

"So you become one of us," Jon Wilson said gravely to Hammond. "I can't help thinking that it is fate that sent you to us so strangely from across time and space. But I need not warn you that you will share our punishment if our enterprise fails."

"You mean that the Vramen would kill us if they caught us?" Hammond asked curiously.

Wilson shook his head.

"The Vramen hold no official position. Their domination is through their scientific powers and prestige. They would turn us over to the courts of the Federated Suns, which would be forced to sentence us for breaking the star-ship laws."

He took Kirk Hammond through the workshops, showing him the amazing activity that was going on. Hammond learned that all this labor was powered by atomic turbines which could supply almost unlimited energy from the controlled disintegration of metallic copper in whirl-chambers.

The energy-guns were in effect small generators capable of ejecting concentrated streams of protons. As the Hooman explained further, Hammond felt more and more bewildered by the great advances that had been made in nearly every field of science.

The ship was being built in small subassemblies. Metal was secured from deep workings below the cavern refuge, the site having been chosen for that reason. When it was time to assemble the ship, energy-blasters would cut away the walls of the different chambers and convert it all into one large underground hangar.

"And when the ship is ready to start, we will simply blast away the rock roof and take off by night," Jon Wilson added.

"But won't the Vramen's radiolocators in that city Rurooma note your departure and investigate?" Hammond objected.

"We plan to sabotage some star-ship due to start at that time, and take off in its place," Gurth Lund explained. "The Vramen will suspect nothing until we're far out in interstellar space."

Wilson's deep eyes shone.

"And then for Corvus Cluster and the world Althar and the great secret!"

Hammond met all the members of the band. There were thirty-six men and thirteen girls, and all of them were technicians or space-men carefully chosen for a definite part in the daring project.

Beside Quobba and Tammas there were four natives of other star-systems—two red-skinned engineers from Betelgeuse, a swarthy little pilot from Altair, and a hollow-eyed, gray-skinned and gloomy looking Algolian navigator.

They were interrupted by the hurried appearance of Shawn Tammas. The little Mizarian had come down from the lookout above.

"Quobba is getting worried," he reported. "There's a Vraman ship cruising overhead which he thinks may suspect our location."

Jon Wilson's gaunt face showed instant anxiety.

"I don't see how they could. But I'll go up."

He and Gurth Lund started up the spiral stair with Tammas. Kirk Hammond and Iva followed them. The Hoomen had stopped their work on hearing the alarming report and were standing about in anxious, waiting groups. In the camouflaged lookout-post inside the fake boulder were Rab Quobba and another Hooman.

"Take a look at the way that cursed ship keeps circling over this region," the big blue Vegan asked Jon Wilson.

Wilson applied his eye to one of the cleverly concealed loopholes. Hammond peered from a similar tiny aperture.

It was a bright, sunny morning out on the rocky coast. He could see blue waves dashing against the distant beach. Then he saw the Vraman ship.

IT WAS a long, shimmering torpedo of transparent substance, that cruised in tightening circles at an altitude of a few hundred feet.

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"They surely can't have found our refuge," Jon Wilson murmured worriedly. "Their spy-rays wouldn's penetrate our shield."

"Spy-rays?" repeated Hammond questioningly, and Iva explained.

"They are rays near the gamma rays in frequency, that can penetrate most substances. They're projected through solid matter and a special transformer converts them into light-waves so you can see by them."

"Our whole underground refuge is shielded by a buried plate of alloy impenetrable to spy-rays," Jon Wilson added. "And yet—"

Kirk Hammond saw the reason for the Hooman leader's worry. That Vraman cruiser was circling closer and closer above them.

Finally the cruiser poised motionless in midair, only a few hundred feet above their masked lookout-post.

"No doubt about it—they've somehow spotted our location!" cried Jon Wilson. "We've got to bring that cruiser down before it calls other Vramen here!"

Big Rab Quobba's massive face flamed with excitement.

"I'll bring it down. Swing aside the ceiling, Tammas!"

With monkey-like quickness the wizened little Mizarian swung to one side the movable section in the roof of the fake boulder. Quobba was already at the breech of the big energy-gun. He jabbed switches and a low, powerful drone came from its bulbous base.

The Vegan sighted swiftly, presesed a button. From the flared muzzle of the heavy instrument leaped upward a flash like a cracking bolt of lightning.

"Got him!" yelled Quobba, fierce excitement on his blue face.

The flash had hit the prow of the little Vraman cruiser and it was plunging headlong toward the ground. It fell a hundred yards from the lookout.

"Quick, we've got to destroy all trace of that ship before others come and find it!" exclaimed Jon Wilson.

He thrust open the concealed door in the side of the lookout and plunged out into the sunlight with Lund and Rab Quobba. Kirk Hammond ran out with them.

"Kirk, come back! There's danger!" he heard Iva Wilson call anxiously.

Hammond, plunging forward after the others, saw that the whole front part of the transparent, torpedo-shaped cruiser was a twisted wreck. In the wreckage were pinned the lifeless bodies of two of the ship's three occupants.

THE third Vraman occupant of the cruiser was stirring dazedly on its floor as Hammond and the three Hoomen reached the wreck and hastily pried open its sprung door.

"It's Thayn Marden, one of the highest of the Vramen here!" yelled Gurth Lund, in sudden excitement.

"Capture her, don't kill her!" cried Wilson. "Taking her prisoner would vastly aid our plans!"

Kirk Hammond was almost frozen with astonishment as he saw through the half-opened door that the surviving Vraman was a girl. She was like no girl he had ever seen before. Her slim, shapely body, clothed only in silken white shorts and sleeveless shirt, seemed to glow all over with a faint, pearly luminescence.

The same faint light shone from her breathtakingly beautiful white face. Even her ashen blond hair scintillated with a like mysterious brilliance. Wide blue eyes, still stunned by shock, looked up at the Hoomen and Hammond as they forced their way into the ship. The Vraman girl seemed instantly to realize that she was trapped in the wreck.

She sprang toward a locker in the wall of the wreck, grabbing for something inside it.

"Don't let her get hold of their weapons or we're done for!" yelled Lund.

The door gave way before them. Kirk Hammond was the first one in.

He dived toward the girl in a tackle that threw her away from the locker. She fought him with incredible, wildcat strength.

CHAPTER VI

Vraman Girl

UNEXPECTED strength in the girl's supple body so surprised Hammond that she almost succeeded in breaking away from him. Thayn Marden's perfumed blond hair pressed against his face as he grappled with her. But in the next moment, Gurth Lund and Quobba had grabbed her also.

"Tie her hands!" Jon Wilson ordered Hammond hastily. "Quick, before other Vraman ships come!"

Hammond tore a cable loose from the

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wreckage inside the ship and used the insulated wire to pinion Thayn's wrists. The Vraman girl's blue eyes blazed lightnings of indignation and wrath at him.

"Take her to the lookout—Gurth and I will fuse the power-chambers to destroy the wreck," Wilson told Quobba and Hammond.

Rab Quobba picked up the captive girl like a child and carried her hastily out of the wreck with Hammond following. When they entered the fake boulder with their captive Iva Wilson looked at her in thunderstruck astonishment.

"Thayn Marden!" breathed the dark Hooman girl. "This is the first time that one of the Vramen has ever been captive of the Hoomen!"

Thayn stood, her slim body arrowstraight and her blue eyes flaming from her dead-white face as she confronted them.

"You are outlaws and fugitives and now you have dared to attack and kill Vramen," she accused, her voice silvery and wrathful.

"There goes the wreck!" exclaimed little Shawn Tammas, hopping gleefully with excitement.

Jon Wilson and Lund had run out of the wrecked cruiser and taken shelter behind a massive boulder some distance away.

Hammond saw the wreck suddenly enveloped by a dazzling explosion as its power-chambers were somehow short-circuited to cause an uncontrolled release of atomic force.

When his dazzled eyes regained vision, the wreck was totally gone and there was a big, blackened crater in the sand. Wilson and the other Hoomen hastily smoothed fresh sand over the scorched spot. Then, smoothing away all footprints behind them, they hurried back into the shelter of the lookout.

Jon Wilson's deep eyes surveyed the captive Vraman girl.

"How did you locate our refuge when it is shielded from your spy-rays?"

Thayn Marden looked at him in silence with a calm more ominous than her former wrath. Her blue eyes had the cold, half-pitying contempt of a goddess looking at foolish mortals.

"Is it possible that the very fact your caverns are impenetrable to spy-rays would arouse her suspicion?" asked Kirk Hammond.

The Vraman girl started imperceptibly, and glanced at him. As she surveyed his dark, lean face and his different clothing there was a flicker of surprise and wonder in Thayn's eyes.

Wilson had not missed her slight start.

"I believe you have guessed it, Hammond. The fact of an underground area completely impenetrable to spy-rays must have given her the clue."

"But we arranged our ray-shields to make it seem that it was only a natural deposit of ray-resistant metals," protested Gurth Lund.

"It would have seemed so to most Vramen," muttered Wilson. "But Thayn Marden is one of the highest Vramen scientists in this solar system, remember. She guessed the truth where another would not have."

Thayn spoke curtly.

"Others will come to search and will finally guess your refuge, too."

"They're not all as clever as you," Jon Wilson reminded. "And don't forget that we now hold *you*, Thayn."

The hatred in Wilson's deep eyes and voice came from depths of passion, the age-old resentment of the Hoomen against this caste of immortal scientists. And that same bitter feeling was mirrored in the faces of the others.

LEAVING Tammas and another man on guard in the lookout, they went down with their prisoner into the underground halls. And here Kirk Hammond saw the blazing excitement of the other Hoomen at this capture. They gathered around, gazing in mixed awe and hatred at the Vraman girl.

Thayn was taken into the little chamber from which Jon Wilson directed the work of his band. Her cool blue eyes had missed no detail of the machines and labor in the big workshop rooms they had come through. And the astronomical charts upon the wall here gave her more clues.

"So this is why you fled from Rurooma and hid here," she said. "You are attempting to build an illegal star-ship."

"We are, and our attempt will succeed," replied Gurth Lund.

"Then yours was the unauthorized craft that our radiolocators showed approaching Earth four nights ago?"

Jon Wilson gestured toward Hammond.

"No, that was his ship. His name is Kirk Hammond and he came from ten thousand years in the past to join us."

Thayn's blue eyes widened a little as she looked at Hammond.

"From the past? It cannot be! And yet his look and speech—"

"It is true!" Iva said triumphantly. "His

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ship took off from this Earth a hundred centuries ago. All those centuries he lay in frozen sleep in space, but awoke when his ship fell back to Earth."

The startled gaze of the beautiful Vraman girl searched Hammond's face.

"Then you come from an age so remote that even we Vramen know little about it. You are no Hooman!"

"I'm with the Hoomen in their fight for justice," Kirk Hammond said bluntly.

"What do you mean by justice?" Thayn demanded quickly.

Jon Wilson spoke solemnly.

"We are building a star-ship that will take us to the one world in the galaxy where you have forbidden Hoomen to go—to Althar!"

"And on Althar we are going to secure the secret of immortality which you Vramen have always hoarded for yourselves," Gurth Lund broke in fiercely. "And then we Hoomen will shake off your domination forever!"

For a moment a shadow of something like horror showed in Thayn Marden's blue eyes.

"To Althar? But you cannot go there! You dare not!" Then her wrath blazed. "No, you dare not! It would violate the pledge made to the Vramen by your government. And even if you dared break that pledge, you could never reach Althar!"

"Can't we?" mocked Gurth Lund. "You forget that the ship we are building will not have your devilish device of destruction built into it.

"The Vramen have other scientific safeguards to protect Althar and you will never pass them even should you win through the perils of that dangerous star-cluster," Thayn replied.

"That," said Jon Wilson meaningly, "is why I wanted to take you prisoner. You know all about the approaches to Althar. You are going to tell us about them and how to overcome those obstacles."

Thayn's blue eyes flashed lightning.

"You don't think I'd ever tell you that? You should know the Vramen better."

Wilson's gaunt face became somber.

"It would be better for you to tell of your free will than to force us to extract the information from you with a brain-reader."

The Vraman girl looked at him steadily.

"That is a mere threat. You do not have one of those instruments here."

"We could improvise one," Wilson retorted. "Among us are scientists of many fields, and two of us have had some experience as psycho-technicians.

"They could construct a makeshift brain-reader. The danger is that such an improvised instrument would wreck your mind in the process of extracting information."

KIRK HAMMOND, despite his hatred of all that Vraman girl represented, felt a dim horror at the implications of the threat.

"You mean that you could actually extort knowledge from her mind by means of a mechanical instrument?" he asked.

Jon Wilson nodded.

"Yes, by means of the brain-reader which scans the neurone synaptic patterns of the cortex and translates them."

"I say do it at once!" exclaimed Gurth Lund passionately, his bleak eyes flaring with that hatred of the Vramen which seemed bitterest in him of all the band. "What if it does wreck her mind in the process?"

"We can commit no such action unless she forces us to," Jon Wilson replied. "Well, Thayn?"

"You might destroy my mind by your clumsy attempt but you would learn nothing," the Vraman girl retorted unyieldingly.

"Why, the very invention of the brain-reader was one of the gifts of us Vramen to your scientists," she added bitterly. "You can not frighten me with that."

"We'll give you a day in which to realize the futility of refusal," Wilson told her. "Then we must make the attempt if you still refuse to tell us about Althar."

Thayn Marden faced him steadily.

"I will tell you but one thing about Althar. Try to go to that forbidden world and instead of immortality you will find only a dreadful fate."

"Quobba, lock her in the small empty storeroom at the end of the north corridor," ordered Wilson. "Set a guard outside the door."

Kirk Hammond felt oppression as he watched the slim figure of the Vraman girl led away. In the shadowy corridor the uncanny luminescence of her body was again faintly visible.

Wilson, seeing the trouble on Hammond's face, told him reassuringly, "She will surely yield her information when she realizes that we can secure it anyway by reading her brain."

"I hope so," Hammond muttered. "It would be ghastly to risk destroying her mind."

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When Wilson and Gurth Lund had gone out into the big workship halls to tell the excited Hoomen what events portended, Iva looked challengingly at Kirk Hammond.

"Is it because Thayn is beautiful that you become suddenly so solicitous about her?" she demanded.

Hammond flushed a little guiltily.

"That's a lot of nonsense, Iva."

"She is a beautiful witch without a soul," warned Iva passionately. "The Vramen are all so. Do not be deceived by her beauty."

Kirk Hammond suddenly grinned down at the black-haired Hooman girl, whose dark face was flushed vividly by her strong emotion.

"Why, Iva, you sound a little jealous," he teased.

"Jealous? You're mad, Kirk!" flashed Iva. "Your wits must still be numb from your long sleep to think that."

But there was a hint of angry tears in her eyes as she turned sharply away from him. Hammond, amazed, swore softly to himself.

Just before darkness fell upon the upper world, Shawn Tammas was relieved and came down from his hours in the lookout with disquieting information.

"Two other Vraman ships went up the coast an hour ago and then came back. They've missed Thayn's craft as we expected."

"They have no reason to suspect this particular spot," Jon Wilson declared. "But none of us for any reason must now venture out onto the surface."

They were retiring later for the night's sleep-period, most of the Hoomen having already done so when big Rab Quobba appeared in considerable excitement.

"I took food and drink to Thayn. And she told me that she might give us information about Althar, but only in exchange for certain information from Hammond."

"From me?" Hammond repeated, astonished. "What could I know that she wants to learn?"

"Thayn is deeply interested in the fact that you come from the far past," said the Vegan. "Even the Vramen know little of that age."

Gurth Lund looked suspicious.

"It's merely an attempt on her part to gain time."

"Perhaps not," said Jon Wilson thoughtfully. "At least it can do no harm for Hammond to question her. She might really tell him something."

Kirk Hammond started to follow Quobba Iva, her face troubled, called after him.

"Remember what I told you, Kirk!"

At the door to Thayn's prison, a Hooman with an energy-pistol in his belt stood guard. Rab Quobba gave him careful instructions.

"You will let Hammond return from the room when he wishes, but make certain that the Vraman girl does not get out."

Hammond was let into the small rock chamber, and heard the door instantly locked after him by the guard.

CHAPTER VII

Weird Attack

THAYN MARDEN faced him from across the room. In the dusk of the place, the strange, faint pearly luminescence of her white body glowed more strongly.

Her blue eyes mocked him.

"You need not be afraid of me, Kirk Hammond. After all, I am only a helpless girl."

"You look about as helpless as a caged wildcat," Hammond said bluntly.

Thayn uttered a low, silvery laugh.

"I am not like the women of your past age?"

"I'll say you're not!" he retorted. "Women didn't live forever in my time."

She shrugged shapely bare shoulders.

"Not forever. I am less than four hundred years old."

"Practically a babe in arms," Hammond said dryly. Then he asked, fascinated, "How do you Vramen do it, Thayn? Does that queer shining of your body have anything to do with your immortality?"

The girl's beautiful face hardened slightly.

"I cannot tell you that. That secret is not for Hoomen."

"Because you Vramen know that if the rest of humanity became immortal, you would lose *your* dominating position!" he accused.

She shook her head.

"That is not the reason. The reason is that immortality is a dreadful burden and the Hoomen will be far happier without it."

"That," said Kirk Hammond skeptically, "is the same kind of high-sounding talk always handed out by a little oligarchy to justify its dominance. Well, the power your immortality gives you wil be broken when we secure the secret of that immortality for all

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men on Althar."

"You will never reach Althar, and even if you did you would only meet a doom whose horror you cannot dream," Thayn said somberly.

She changed the subject to ask, "Tell me, Kirk Hammond, is it true that you come from the remote past?"

"It's true enough though I can hardly blame you if you don't believe it."

Thayn's eyes inspected him musingly.

"I can almost believe it, for you speak and look as no Hooman of today does. And if it is so, you come from a time of which even we Vramen know little, for its records were destroyed in the early interplanetary wars.

"What was it like, that time ten thousand years ago? What was the Earth like then?"

Sudden, unexpected homesickness for his own time swept Kirk Hammond at the question. The strangeness of this far future world was abruptly again overwhelming, and he felt a deep and futile nostalgia.

"It wasn't a perfect world by any means, but it was mine," he muttered. "My own people, my own friends—"

"And a girl you loved?" persisted Thayn curiously. Despite his gesture of denial she went on, "Was she as beautiful as I am?"

She had come closer to Hammond, was looking up at him with tip-tilted white face provocative in mock-innocence, her blue eyes soft. The subtle perfume of her glimmering blond hair made his pulses pound.

Sharp alarm sounded in Hammond's brain as he suddenly realized that she was tempting him and was doing a remarkably good job at it. Her red lips were close, her small hands grasped his shoulders.

"Was she, Kirk Hammond?" whispered Thayn.

Not if the sky had thundered could Kirk Hammond have refrained from the kiss she invited. Her half-parted lips were strangely cool and sweet, and her supple, glowing body was firm and elastic in his grasp. He felt his senses reel.

Thayn's hands had slipped up his shoulders to his neck. Suddenly, unexpectedly, her thumbs dug deeply into the nerves at the base of his neck. Hammond was paralyzed by a blinding shock of pain. He would have cried out if he had been able to open his mouth, but couldn't.

SUDDENLY every muscle in his body seemed frozen in icy agony, by that scientifically skillful nerve-pressure the Vraman girl had suddenly applied.

"Only a trick!" raged Hammond's thought. "And you fell for it—"

Thayn Marden, her eyes flashing, was pushing him toward the door of the room. Hammond could not resist, could not speak, frozen by agony.

The Vraman girl reached past him, knocked sharply on the door, and concealed herself behind Kirk Hammond's swaying, upright figure.

The door was cautiously opened by the Hooman guard, his energy-pistol in his hand. Seeing Hammond before him, the guard relaxed a little and started to stand aside.

Thayn Marden acted! With wildcat swiftness, her hand darted around Hammond and snatched the energy-pistol from the Hooman's hand. She did not fire the weapon. She brought its butt down on the Hooman's head in a lightning blow, before he could cry out. The guard sank to the floor, and Thayn darted past him down the corridor.

Kirk Hammond, deprived of her support, crashed to the floor himself. He was still a living log, his nerves paralyzed by her scientific pressure, but his mind was seething with rage and shame.

He was guilty of Thayn's escape. She had used the oldest trick in the world to gain an opportunity for that stunning attack, and like a fool he had fallen for it.

But even though out of her prison, surely the Vraman girl couldn't escape to the surface? She couldn't get past the Hooman guards up in the lookout-post without causing a general alarm that would quickly result in her recapture. If he could only cry out—

Hammond tried to shout and couldn't. Every nerve in his body was still numb, his muscles refused to obey his brain. He lay there beside the unconscious guard, suffering tortures of self-accusation as the minutes passed. The cavern-world remained silent, sleeping.

At last it seemed to him that a faint glow of feeling was coming back into his nerves. With desperate hope, he tried to move and found himself stirring feebly. He got to his knees, then uttered a hoarse cry that reverberated down the corridor.

"Quobba! Wilson!" he husked, tripping and stumbling as he tried to gain his feet.

He heard alarmed voices, hurrying footsteps. Rab Quobba and Jon Wilson and

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others burst out of their sleeping-chambers.

"The prison-room is empty—Thayn's gone!" exclaimed the big Vegan, stupefied.

Gurth Lund swung savagely on Kirk Hammond, whipping out an energy-pistol.

"You helped her escape! You're a Vraman spy as I thought from the first!"

"*No!*" Hammond denied hoarsely. "She tricked me, I admit, but I didn't mean—"

He broke off, pointed down the corridor. "She's still somewhere down here. There's been no alarm from the lookout-post."

The Hoomen sprang forward. Hammond followed them unsteadily through the lighted rock halls to the big workshop.

Lund shouted fiercely. Thayn was across the big room, bent over one of the tables of apparatus. Her weapon had been laid aside on the table. She had apparently been working with superhuman speed, for on the table was droning one of the small electric generators whose wiring had been altered.

She swung around as Lund and Jon Wilson and the others burst into the hall. Lund's energy-pistol covered her. Thayn merely smiled calmly, and did not try to reach for her own weapon.

"Turn off that generator!" cried Jon Wilson, his face alarmed. "She's been doing something with it."

SHAWN TAMMAS darted forward and tore the wires away, and the apparatus stopped its drone.

Thayn laughed.

"Too late, Hooman. For the last few minutes it has been broadcasting an electromagnetic beam of frequency that can penetrate even your spy-ray shields.

"That beam will have registered on the instruments of the Vraman ships searching this coast," she added coolly. "They'll be here almost at once."

Gurth Lund raised his pistol a little, his square face dark and deadly.

"I warn you that if you kill me it will only increase the punishment that is now inevitable for you all," Thayn said quietly.

"Nevertheless, you're going to die," hissed Lund. "And your spy and helper is going to die with you."

His weapon swung slightly as he stepped back a little to bring Kirk Hammond also within line of its blast.

Iva Wilson ran forward with a sharp cry.

"You can't do that, Gurth! Kirk did not mean to help her!"

"You're in love with him, but that won't save him," raged Lund. "He has betrayed the hopes of the whole Hooman race."

In Kirk Hammond's numbed brain, a clear, cold voice seemed suddenly to speak. It was like that strange mental voice which had attacked him hypnotically on the night when he and Quobba had crouched beneath the searching firefly ships.

"Put down all your weapons," commanded that chill mental voice.

Lund's energy-pistol clattered to the floor as did the weapons of Quobba and Jon Wilson and the others. Hammond looked wildly upward. Down the spiral stair from the lookout post a half-dozen men were coming. They carried an object like a big searchlight. From it sprang a broad fan of pale green force that enveloped every Hooman in the rock hall.

It was the weapon of hypnotic attack. And neither he nor the Hooman were wearing the protective turbans now!

The men who carried that strange weapon were subtly alien. Their calm faces and superb bodies had the same faint pearly luminescence that shimmered from Thayn's supple figure.

"The Vramen!" groaned Jon Wilson. "They've already overpowered the lookout guards, and—"

Kirk Hammond, standing with the stricken Hoomen, heard another cold, hynotic command inside his mind.

"Sleep now," it came authoritatively. *"Sleep!"*

The Hoomen were already sinking to the floor around him. Darkness swept over Hammond's brain.

CHAPTER VIII

In Rurooma

IT WAS with an unusual sensation of strength and vigor, that Hammond awoke. For the first time since his strange resurrection in this future world he did not feel dragging weakness. Rarely, indeed, had he ever felt so well.

He lay upon a soft, low couch. At its foot stood an apparatus like a tall lamp, whose violent light had played upon his body as he slept. Was it that which had washed away his former weakness?

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Kirk Hammond's eyes dazedly took in the small room. Its floor, ceiling and three of the walls were of a substance that looked like green porcelain. The fourth wall, a slightly curving one, was perfectly transparent and admitted a flood of bright sunlight.

"*Good heavens!*" Hammond exclaimed, as memory suddenly rushed over him. "The Vramen!"

He remembered everything now—his folly, Thayn's escape and the Vramen who had answered her signal and had overpowered all the Hoomen in the underground refuge with their uncanny hypnotic weapon.

Hammond got to his feet and went to the single door of the room. It was locked and hammering upon it produced no impression. Baffled, he went to that transparent wall which was a single big window.

He looked forth, stunned. He was high above a city. And it was such a city as neither Kirk Hammond nor any other man of his time had ever seen before. It was no vast, huddled metropolis of planless structures. There were no more than a hundred buildings in the city. But they were the buildings of giants, colossal pylons, each almost a mile in height.

Each of the gigantic pylons looked like an erect bundle of round glass rods. The cross-section was such, Hammond guessed, as to admit maximum sunlight to the interiors. Flashing and glittering in the sunshine, with torpedo-shaped fliers flitting over their cloud-high tips, they were mind-rocking.

"The city Rurooma!" Kirk Hammond whispered. "Rurooma, as the Hoomen described it. And that means—"

His presence here meant tragedy. It meant that he and all his Hoomen friends, overpowered by the Vramen, had been brought here to be punished for their conspiracy.

Hamomnd felt the anguish of guilt. It was a bitter irony that he, who had sympathized so deeply with the Hoomen's aspirations, should have been the one to bring ruin to their hopes. Where were Jon Wilson and Iva and the others now?

He swung around sharply as the door opened. Anger fired his brain as he saw Thayn Marden enter. He advanced toward her, his hands clenched.

Thayn spoke a calm warning, displaying a silver pencil-like tube she held.

"I can shock you unconscious with this if you force me to."

Hammond stopped, shaking with rage. Yet even in his fury he admitted to himself that the Vramen girl was more beautiful than ever.

Thayn now wore black, silky shirt and shorts that made the loveliness of her supple white body transcendent. On her shoulder was an odd badge of glittering gems, and a jewelled band confined her blond hair. Her face was quite calm, her blue eyes inspected Hammond gravely.

"What have you done with Jon Wilson and Quobba and the others?" Kirk Hammond demanded savagely.

Thayn answered unhesitatingly.

"They are in this building. Like you, they have been kept here the last two days awaiting trial."

"Two days?" Hammond repeated, for the moment astonished out of his anger. "Do you mean that I've been here that long?"

Thayn nodded.

"When we examined you we found your body still suffering from that long frozen sleep in space. It was deemed wise to keep you under revivifying radiation during this time."

Kirk Hammond's mind reverted to her statement about his friends.

"You say Wilson and the others are all right? How do I know you're not lying?"

"We Vramen are truth-seekers. We are not in the habit of lying," Thayn Marden answered coldly.

"I suppose it was not a lying trick that you used on me to win your escape?"

THE girl shrugged shapely shoulders.

"That was a case of extreme emergency. Any subterfuge is excusable to prevent the Hoomen from learning the secret of our immortality."

"No real woman would use a subterfuge like that," Hammond said savagely. "But it would come naturally enough to a four-hundred-year-old creature like a Vraman girl."

He wanted fiercely to hurt her and he succeeded, for this time something in his words struck home.

Thayn winced, and when after a moment she spoke, her voice was dull with pain.

"You have a right to say that to me," she said, looking at him steadily. "But now will you hear why I have come?"

"To tell me that I'm to be tried and punished with the others?" retorted Hammond. "All right, I'm perfectly ready."

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"You will not receive punishment unless you prove utterly intractable," Thayn told him.

"We know now that your story of coming from the remote past is wholly true," she continued rapidly. "For we have succeeded in raising your little rocket-ship from the sea.

"We of the Vramen live primarily to enlarge scientific knowledge. You can add greatly to our knowledge of the past. For as I told you, the records of your pre-planetary civilization were mostly destroyed by the great wars between Earth, Mars and Venus in the Twenty-fifth Century.

"If you will agree to assist our researches in every way possible, to answer all our questions and submit to our psycho-testers, we will ask the Hoomen's court to suspend sentence upon you for your part in the conspiracy."

"I'll make no such bargain," Hammond answered smolderingly. "I'm against your little caste of supermen who dominate the whole race, and I stick with Wilson and my friends."

"That is because you do not truly know the truth," Thayn persisted. "We Vramen exercise leadership only because our vastly longer lives give us power to see and guide humanity down the right paths."

"If you only want to help humanity, then why don't you let them all become immortal like yourselves?" Hammond demanded unbelievingly.

Thayn Marden looked a little weary.

"I see that you will not listen to reason. The others have infected you with their prejudices, and you bitterly resent my trick because you are in love with me."

"In love with you? You must be a little crazy to think that," retorted Hammond.

Thayn smiled mockigly.

"While you lay sleeping a brain-reader was used upon you as upon the other prisoners to secure evidence for your trial. I was permitted to see the records.

"They show that you have been in love with me from the moment you saw me, even though you try to crowd the fact down into your subconscious."

She went out, locking the door after her and leaving Kirk Hammond with his angry reply unuttered.

In love with that cold-blooded Vraman girl! That was how much their mind-reading was worth, he thought furiously. He had felt a momentary physical attraction for her and they'd mistaken that as love.

An hour later the door was opened and two men entered. They were clean-cut young Hoomen in black uniforms with an emblem of clustered golden disks on the breast of each.

Both wore energy-pistols.

One spoke quietly to Hammond.

"We are officers of the Federated Suns Police. We are to take you to your trial."

Hammond went out with them into a curving corridor of cool green glass, the material somehow lighted from within.

In the corridor were other guards and their two-score and more prisoners—Jon Wilson's band.

"Wilson! Quobba! You're all all right?" Kirk Hammond exclaimed anxiously, as he joined them.

JON WILSON'S reply was a stony silence. Gurth Lund glared at him, and even Rab Quobba and little Tammas avoided his gaze.

Hammond was stunned by the hostile reception.

"Why, what's the matter?"

The guard officer intervened.

"You cannot talk here. The court is waiting."

They were marched into a small room that proved to be a lift, for it suddenly sank downward with great speed. Hammond found himself beside Iva Wilson and he spoke to her in an anxious whisper.

"Iva, they surely don't think yet that I was a Vraman spy? If I were, would I be a prisoner too?"

Iva looked at him unhappily.

"Gurth and the others say that is only a trick."

The lift stopped, and they were led from it into a large and austerely beautiful courtroom. Its floor was a lake of smooth black. The walls just above the floor were dusky gray, and this shaded upward through lighter and lighter grays to the pure white climax of the vaulted ceiling.

Kirk Hammond perceived a dais on which sat the Hooman he assumed to be their judge. Below this dais were long seats, on one of which sat Thayn Marden and several other Vramen.

"The cursed Vramen are here to see that the court sentences us properly," he heard Rab Quobba mutter to Tammas.

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Hundreds of Hoomen spectators crowded the courtroom, and a murmur of many voices came from them as the prisoners walked to their seats.

"That is he, the tall, dark one! The man from the far past!"

Hammond suddenly realized that *he* was the center of the crowd's curiosity. Apparently news of his incredible advent from ten thousand years before had spread rapidly. Even the Hooman judge, a keen-eyed, middle aged Earthman, looked down at him with more than usual interest.

Over the dais glittered an emblem of clustered gold disks which Hammond was later to learn was the official insigne of the Federated Suns government.

"You have been charged with the offense of secretly building an illegal star-ship," the Hooman judge told the prisoners.

He picked up a sheaf of papers.

"These are the brain-readers' records of your minds. You have had a chance to examine them. Do you wish to protest any part of the records?"

"You would only make new readings," Jon Wilson answered sullenly. "We will not protest the brain-records."

The judge looked at Thayn.

"Thayn Marden, as the person making the charge, you also have been permitted to examine the records. Do you wish to protest any part of them?"

"I do not challenge anything in those records," Thayn answered quickly.

It became apparent to Kirk Hammond from the speed with which all this was carried through that it was a mere legal formality, that no one expected the brain-records to be challenged.

How could you challenge a precise, scientific recording of a man's mind? There was no place in this super-modern court for lawyers and legal tricks, for lies and denials and evasions.

The Hooman judge was speaking on to the band of prisoners who faced him.

"You well knew that you were breaking the law of the Federated Suns government when you attempted secretly to build an

"You're the Only One in the World Who Can Explain My Luck to Me and Show Me How to Use It —and You Better Do It!"

STEVE SIMS, former professor of physics, looked in amazement at Lucky Connors, who had just conked him on the head a few minutes before—and was now making this strange demand of him. With the two men was the girl named Frances. It was a miracle that any of them were alive.

The terrain around them was utterly dead and completely uninhabitable, destroyed a long time ago by atomic explosives. The surface of the ground was melted to a sort of cracked glassy substance which was highly radioactive. Only homeless wanderers were alive, and there was little food, no means of maintaining life much longer.

In the midst of this devastation, it was odd to be questioned about the laws of probability. Steve Sims had been working on an analysis of the principles of chance. Lucky Connors was phenomenally lucky, could make anything turn out as he wanted it to—and Lucky Connors wanted to know why!

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unauthorized star-ship.

"You know that our government pledged the Vramen long ago that no star-ship would be built without their incorporating into it their secret device which prevents intruders from visiting their sanctuary at Althar."

"We do not recognize that pledge as binding upon all Hoomen," Jon Wilson replied with harsh passion.

His deep eyes held a bitter light.

"Why should the Vramen hold that power over all star-ships? Why should they hoard the secret of unlimited life while we die after brief lives? Why should they dominate all our race?"

There was a low mutter of assent from the crowd in the courtroom, at these defiant words.

IT WAS evident to Kirk Hammond that most Hoomen felt the same resentment Wilson had just expressed.

The judge glanced nervously at the calm-faced Vramen below his dais, as he answered.

"The validity of our pledge to the Vramen is not in question here. We made the pledge and we will abide by it. By breaking it and by attempting to foment hostility toward the Vramen you have committed a crime of state. Since you can offer no extenuation and have not protested the brain-records your guilt is beyond dispute. You are sentenced to ten years on the penal planet of Spica."

"We expected no other judgment," Jon Wilson said harshly. "But a day will come when Hoomen will *take* the secret of immortality from the Vramen and throw off their dominance of our civilization for good."

Again, that mutter of angry agreement swept the crowd of spectators. It was peremptorily silenced by the judge.

"Our sentence applies to all defendants except the one named Kirk Hammond," he said. "I understand that the Vramen representatives here wish to ask commutation of his sentence."

He looked inquiringly at Thayn Marden. The Vraman girl rose and glanced at Hammond's defiant face as she spoke.

"That was our intention," Thayn said, "but the man Kirk Hammond has utterly refused to cooperate with us."

The judge looked down at Hammond, a little troubled. "That is unfortunate. As a man cast by miraculous chance from your past age into our time you would ordinarily be an admired and honored guest among us.

"But you have, by evidence of your brain-record, conspired with these others in full knowledge that you were breaking our laws. The exceptional circumstances of your personal history cannot justify overlooking your deliberate infraction of the law of the Federated Suns. Only if the Vramens' representatives request it can I suspend your sentence."

"We are still quite willing to make the request if the man Hammond will agree to assist our researches," said Thayn calmly.

All of Kirk Hammond's smoldering resentment toward the beautiful Vraman girl flared into his hot reply.

"I'll see you in blazes before I make any agreement with the little bunch of self-styled supermen who run things here!"

"Then you must serve your sentence on Kuum, the penal planet of Spica," said the judge. "You will not be released unless you change your mind and agree to do as the Vramen ask."

CHAPTER IX

Prison Planet

BRACING, droning, quivering, the blunt-nosed star-ship rushed into the black gulf of interstellar space at a speed that could only be measured in many multiples of the velocity of light.

From a porthole window in the main prisoners' cabin Kirk Hammond looked back. But he could see nothing of the receding Earth and Sun but a twisted blur of light rays in which they wavered like ghosts.

Iva Wilson spoke at his shoulder.

"There's no use looking back. The space-split prevents you from seeing anything behind clearly."

"The space-split? That's what drives the ship?"

Hammond was still a little overwhelmed by the swiftness of the transition to space. They had been marched from the courtroom to an underground tubeway that took them swiftly to the great spaceport east of Rurooma.

That spaceport had been stunning enough, with its dozens of large oval star-ships, its terminals and docks thronged with a cosmopolitan throng that represented nearly every

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Hooman star-folk in the galaxy.

The had been marched into the black police ship with the emblem of the Federated Suns on its bows, down to this lower prison-deck sealed off from the rest of the ship. Then they had taken off.

Utterly different from his own wild and hazardous take-off in his rocket long ago had been this start! Generators in the ship had droned loud, there had been a sudden sense of weight as they sat in the recoil-chairs and then this fantastic blur of space falling astern.

To Jon Wilson and the others all this was not startling. They were star-ship men, most of them—accustomed to coming and going across the galactic spaces. But to Hammond it was unreal, uncanny.

The blurred ghost-sun and spectral planets dwindled rapidly behind them. The drone of generators rose ever higher as the ship flung through space at speeds Hammond could not even guess.

"How can a ship *split* the space it travels through?" he asked Iva puzzledly.

The girl's clear brow wrinkled.

"I'm not much of a technician, Kirk. But suppose you have a boat going through water. If you could split the water just ahead of the boat by some means, you could drive it far faster, couldn't you? As fast as a plane even?

"It's that way in space. Space is a three-dimensional continuum. Relativity proved long ago that space can expand, can be strained, can be warped. Apply enough warping force and it can be split wide open, relative to the fourth spatial dimension.

"That's what the generators of a star-ship do. They fling ahead twin fields of opposing force that set up such a terrific strain on the continuum that it perpetually splits open right in front of the ship. Thus, in a way, the ship goes *around* space instead of through it."

Hammond shook his head.

"It's just as well you're not more of a technician. I can grasp the principle, but the details would floor me."

Jon Wilson and Gurth Lund and the others looked at Hammond without friendliness as he turned from the port and approached them.

Hammond spoke earnestly.

"I know it's my fault we're all here, for letting Thayn Marden escape. I wish I could undo it. But I can't.

Rab Quobba got to his feet.

"Sure, that's what I tell them. It was just bad luck. You're not to blame."

Gurth Lund looked at Hammond with bleak, bitter eyes.

"Not to blame? If he hadn't been a blind fool—"

"But he was—young men always are," cackled little Shawn Tammas, grinning all across his wizened face.

[*Turn page*]

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KIRK HAMMOND looked at Jon Wilson. The Hooman leader's gaunt face had not softened.

"I could forgive a blunder, even though it has ruined all our hopes," Wilson said raspingly. "But I am not sure but that you let Thayn Marden escape deliberately."

"Father, you know that's not so!" protested Iva.

"If I'd done that, why would I refuse to help the Vramen when it would have secured my freedom?" Hammond demanded hotly.

"That," said Wilson slowly, "is what I would like to know. It could be a trick on the part of the Vramen, to send you along with us for the time being as a spy."

Kirk Hammond could not believe his ears. The Hooman leader had always seemed to him a fair-minded man.

"You've not one scrap of proof of such a charge!" he said angrily.

"Yes, I have," Jon Wilson answered sternly. "As leader of the accused, I was allowed to examine the brain-records made before our trial so that I might exercise my legal right of protesting them if I wished."

Quobba and Lund and the others looked puzzled. But Hammond knew with a sudden sinking sensation what was coming.

"I found in Hammond's brain-record clear indication that he was in love with Thayn Marden!"

A roar of anger burst from the prisoners. They leaped to their feet and Gurth Lund advanced on Hammond, his square face deadly.

"I knew it from the first!" raged Lund. "I should have killed him when I had the chance. But it's not too late—"

He charged at Hammond. Surprised by the sudden fierce attack, Kirk Hammond failed to dodge the other's swinging fists. He went down from a stunning blow. Gurth Lund's hands gripped his throat, and the Hooman's eyes glared down into his as he throttled him.

With a savage effort, Hammond doubled his knees and sent Lund reeling back off him. Lund gathered himself to renew the attack, but Jon Wilson grasped him, held him back.

"No, Gurth! You'll only bring the guards down here and cause us all to be locked into our cabins."

"Lund's right," growled one of the scowling Hoomen. "We ought to kill him."

"It would cause our sentences on Kuum to be lengthened to life!" Wilson said forcefully. "I say no."

Kirk Hammond had got to his feet. He ignored the raging Lund and addressed himself to the leader.

"Wilson, I swear I'm on your side! I admit I was stupid to let Thayn trick me that night, but it was stupidity and not treachery."

Jon Wilson eyed him harshly.

"It may be as you say. But we can no longer trust you. We can trust no one who is mad enough to love a Vraman."

"I tell you, I don't love that blasted girl!" Hammond began angrily.

They didn't listen to him. They turned their backs on him and ignored him completely in the hours that followed. It was a miserable time, for Hammond. He had no one to speak to. There was not even a guard, for the prison-compartment was entirely sealed off from the rest of the ship.

Their food and drink was sent in to them through a small conveyor arrangement. After eating the simple meal of synthetic jellies, the Hoomen retired to their tiny sleeping-cabins as a bell signaled the sleep-period.

Kirk Hammond remained in the main cabin, looking miserably out the port. The ship was still droning its way at unguessable velocities into the great starry deeps of the galaxy. He could not see Spica, for the star of their destination was straight ahead. But he could distinguish Vega and Fomalhaut and Altair strung across the heavens amid the hosts of lesser stars.

HE HAD dreamed, long ago, that men might conquer the stars though he had never thought that he himself would see it. And now he was going out into those galactic mysteries. But there was no thrill in it in his present situation.

"Ostracised by the only friends I had in this age!" Hammond thought dismally. "Hated and distrusted by the Hoomen I wanted to help—"

He felt an angry reaction that made him momentarily wish that he had accepted the Vramen's offer. But that passed quickly. He couldn't have done it. He sympathized too strongly with the Hoomen in their fight against the Vraman injustice, their struggle to win the great secret for their people.

He turned suddenly at a step behind him. It was Iva Wilson and her dark, pretty face was unhappy as she looked at Hammond.

"Kirk, I'm sorry about what happened. But I didn't dare speak to you before the others."

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He looked at her.

"Iva, *you* don't believe that I was guilty of any treachery?"

"Of course not," she said quickly. "It was just Thayn Marden's devilish tricks. Is it true that you're in love with her, Kirk?"

"Of course not!" he exploded. "I'll admit I was a little attracted when she deliberately tempted me. What man wouldn't be? And that got into my brain-record and they thought it meant I loved her! Who could love a cold-blooded, ice-hard person like that?"

Iva looked relieved.

"I was sure it must be so. For a Hooman to love a Vraman is too impossible!"

"Why is it?" he asked. "Don't any of the Vramen ever marry Hoomen?"

"The Vramen never marry at all!" Iva told him. "They forswear love and marriage when they become immortal, and become just cold, unhuman thinking-machines.

"Kirk," she went on, "the others will come around in time when they realize you're no traitor. We'll be on Kuum a long time, and they'll have time to think."

"I hope so," Hammond said dubiously. "But I can't figure Gurth Lund ever warming up to me. Why does he hate me so?"

"It is the Vramen he hates, very bitterly," Iva said. "You see, the girl Gurth loved died of illness a few years ago. He brooded upon the fact that if the Hoomen had had the secret of life she would not have died. That is what made him so bitter.

"My father is the same," she added. "It was my mother's death that made him so fiercely determined to win the secret of unending life for the Hoomen."

She pointed to a misty-looking star that shone amid the hosts of sparkling suns ahead.

"How would you feel if you saw the person you most loved dying and knew there was a secret of life there that would prevent it?"

Hammond stared at the misty star.

"That's where Althar is, then?"

Iva nodded soberly. "That is Corvus Cluster, and deep within its mazes lies mysterious Althar and its secret."

Kirk Hammond could now understand Lund's bitterness and Jon Wilson's fierce, rebellious determination.

"Poor chaps! No wonder they hate the Vramen for denying them the secret that would have meant so much!"

He gripped Iva's small hand.

"I won't let their attitude toward me change me, Iva. I'm still heart and soul with your people and somehow we'll yet find a way to wrest that secret from the Vramen and end their domination."

The girl shook her dark head doubtfully.

"I pray that it may be so. But I fear that there is no hope once we are on Kuum."

SHE turned away.

"I must go back to my cabin before the others see me here. My father would not allow me to speak with you."

Her hand was still in Hammond's. On sudden impulse he bent and kissed her shy, pretty face.

The touch of her lips was warm and eager and dear. And yet—what devil put the thought into his head?—it was not the electric thrill that had been in Thayn Marden's cool lips.

Kirk Hammond kept his resolve and determinedly overlooked the hostility of his fellow prisoners during the next "days". Sooner or later, they would get over their distrust of him and then he could plan with them to carry on the struggle to which he had dedicated himself.

Seven sleep-periods went by and the whole aspect of the constellations had changed. That was proof of the tremendous speed with which the space-split drive hurled the police ship through the galaxy.

Hammond felt wonder at the realization that hosts of other ships were speeding through that vast starry space, to smoky red Antares and dim Algol and green Sirius. He was overwhelmed by the vastness of the galactic civilization that had been built up in ten thousand years.

On the eighth day the ship veered to disclose the blazing white globe of Spica straight ahead. The unearthly velocities of the drive had taken them across scores of parsecs, and they were approaching their destination.

The droning generators changed in key, dropping down the scale, as the ship curved in through the dazzling white glare of Spica. The great white sun had but one planet, Kuum. That world's lonely isolation here was why it had been chosen to serve as a penal planet.

Kuum was a black-and-white world, no larger than Earth. It had small, milky-white oceans and continents covered with rolling, blue-black jungle that was broken only by little clearings of pale gray grass.

There was one large cleared region scores

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of miles across, surrounded by the dark jungle. This space held cultivated fields and a small town of metal houses with a compact spaceport near it.

"So this is Kuum!" rumbled big Rab Quobba, his massive blue face disgusted as he stared down. "It's one of the few worlds I never visited or wanted to visit."

Jon Wilson's gaunt face was deeply discouraged.

"Now I can see why nobody in all history has ever escaped this prison planet."

CHAPTER X

Star-Men's Hatred

EASILY, the star-ship sank toward the little spaceport, and landed on a tarmac that bore no other ships. Presently the prisoners were marched out into the soft, humid warm air and the eye-aching brilliance of setting Spica.

There rose at the edge of the spaceport a square, towered cement building with the Federated Suns emblem on it. Kirk Hammond guessed it to contain the police barracks and offices. The building and the whole spaceport were enclosed by a high, shimmering wall of white light.

"They've certainly got this place well guarded," muttered little Shawn Tammas, behind Hammond. "Look at that force-wall."

"I see it," rumbled Quobba. "A rat wouldn't have a chance of getting through it to this spaceport."

Hammond gathered that the wall of shimmering light was in reality a wall of unceasing atomic force that would blast anyone who tried to cross it. Only a few score police seemed stationed here. Their commandant, a tall green Sirian Hooman officer, spoke crisply.

"You prisoners won't find your sentence here too unbearable. But you must not try to leave this world. It would be suicide to attempt it, for no star-ship ever lands here except inside this compound, and no prisoner is permitted to enter this area except on arriving or departing."

He nodded to a subordinate officer.

"Take them in and assign them quarters. They'll soon learn the ropes."

They were led toward the shimmering force-wall. Their escort made a signal to the guard in the tower of the police building. A section of the force-wall was turned off. They passed over projectors sunk deep in the ground from which came the perpetual atomic blast. Then the wall came on again behind them.

"And it can only be turned on or off from that tower inside it," muttered Tammas. "There's no chance of escape here."

Kirk Hammond had expected the prison planet to be a grim, forbidding place. And the distant jungles still looked dark and wild. But he was amazed by the rest of the prison settlement. Before them in the blazing white sunset lay a neat town of bright metal cottages and brilliant gardens. Women were chatting from door to door and children played in the streets.

Men were trooping in from their day's work in the distant jungle, in power-trucks. They were a motley lot from every part of the galaxy, Hoomen with red skins, white skins, green skins. But there was no sullenness about them as they hailed their wives and children.

"It doesn't look like a penal colony at all!" Hammond exclaimed to the guard-officer leading them.

The officer looked surprised.

"What do you mean? What else did you expect?"

Hammond began to understand. The galactic civilization of the Federated Suns was too modern and advanced to use harsh punishments. Such penalties were as outmoded now as knights in armor. This was more of a detention world than a place of vengeful punishment.

"Those among you who are family groups will be given cottages," the officer said. "The rest will live in the barracks."

Kirk Hammond, like Quobba and Lund and most of the other men, was given living quarters in one of the big, shining barracks buildings.

They were eagerly greeted by the dozens of other men here. Hammond was bewildered by the motley character of his fellow prisoners. Here were gathered lawbreakers from many parts of the galaxy, from Vega, Antares, Arcturus and many other stars. All were Hoomen, all spoke the same language, but in color and manner they differed.

Hammond heard gossip of far stars and galactic ports of which he had never heard. Quobba asked for news of his home world at

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Vega, and little Shawn Tammas retailed the latest events at Sol.

BUT when Gurth Lund told the reason for their own imprisonment, a surge of excitement passed through the crowd.

"You were trying to reach Althar? By the suns, I wish you'd made it and found the cursed Vramen's secret!" cried a fat pink Antarian.

"We've not given up hope yet," said Gurth Lund tightly.

"You'd better give it up," advised a dark, stocky Centaurian. "For if you're thinking of escaping from Kuum, you can forget it."

He explained.

"Except for ships bringing new prisoners, no craft except a supply-ship each month comes here. And what ships do come stay inside that walled compound, and take off as soon as unloaded."

Kirk Hammond had been included in the general cheerful greeting to the newcomers, had been eagerly questioned about Sol and Earth. But when he awoke the next morning he found things changed. The other prisoners in the barracks glared at him and did not speak. Thol Orr, a wrinkled old Algolian with a wise, pallid face, was the only man to speak to Hammond.

"They say you are a spy of the Vramen," he told Hammond. "I'm afraid you're in for a rough time here."

Hammond's heart sank.

"It's not true, but I suppose there's no way I can convince them."

Thol Orr looked at him with deep interest.

"Is it true that you come from the far past as they say? That is hard to believe."

He shook his head, when Hammond finished his brief explanation.

"Truly, yours is a wonderful story. I want to hear more of it. I shall have you assigned to my crew in the jungle."

It developed that all work here on Kuum was under the direction of the prisoners themselves. No guards bothered them except to make short inspection trips through the settlement each evening.

The Federated Suns government paid a fixed wage to the men for clearing away the jungle that surrounded the settlement. They had power-dozers, trucks and other machinery, but nothing that could possibly be used as weapons.

Thol Orr was as good as his word, and had Hammond assigned to his own jungle-clearing crew. They rolled out of the little town in a power-truck and Hammond rode in the cab with the old Algolian.

"Perhaps you'd better ostracise me like the others or they'll be treating you as a spy too," Hammond said bitterly.

Thol Orr smiled.

"I am not afraid of that. And I am deeply interested in your story, for I was once a scientist of some note."

"What happened to put you here on Kuum?"

The old Algolian shrugged.

"My enthusiasm for research got the best of me. I took a small star-ship and entered forbidden Corvus Cluster some years ago. For that offense I was sentenced to Kuum."

Hammond's pulse jumped.

"You were in there hunting for Althar, for the secret of life?"

"No, not at all," denied Thol Orr. "I was a radiation expert and merely wished to study an unique radiation in that cluster. But of course that did not excuse my breaking the law."

By the time they reached the edge of the

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jungle Spica had risen well into the sky and its white radiance was already very hot. The warm, humid air brought a dank mist from the tenebrous glades of the forest.

Hammond had never seen anything like this black jungle. It was like a forest out of some demoniac painter's fevered imagination, a bewildering tangle of glossy black trees and shrubs whose branches bore great masses of pale gray leaves. There were looping black vines, and enormous pure white flowers, and strange featherless birds darting to and fro amid the gray fronds.

THE trees and brush had to be rooted out with the power-dozers. As fast as a small section was cleared, it was plowed deeply and chemicals were mixed into its soil which would inhibit the growth of the rank jungle-plants and would allow gray grass to spring up instead.

"You will handle one of the chains," Thol Orr told Hammond. "You see, we pull the larger trees out by main force."

Kirk Hammond found himself working with the others of the motley little crew under the old Algolian's orders.

"Fasten your chain around that tree—no, lower down," Thol Orr called. "Now stand clear."

The power-dozer, driven by heavy atomics, sank its spiked tracks into the ground and yanked the tree forth bodily. Flights of huge insects, like giant dragon-flies, skittered from its branches as it fell. The sun poured down ever more hotly. Hammond soon got the routine of the work. But he quickly found that he still had much to learn about the jungles of Kuum.

Crawler-vines writhed down from trees and looped about his body, tiny sucker-roots fastened onto his arms and face. He tore the uncanny plants loose. But a worse experience was ahead.

Late that afternoon Hammond was pulling one of the drag-chains into the thick brush ahead of the crew when he smelled a peculiarly heavy, musky odor. Next moment, he bumped into a round black mound higher than his head.

The black mound suddenly came alive! It heaved slightly, and from beneath it a huge, horny paw reached out and grasped Hammond.

Crushed, half-stunned, he felt himself being dragged back toward the mound he now recognized as a giant, shelled, turtle-like creature. Hammond was near the beast's body when the paw dragging him stopped. It remained clutching him, but a sharp tremor ran through it and through the whole huge, shelled body.

Half conscious, unable even to cry for help in the grip of that enormous paw, Kirk Hammond gave himself up for lost. The others were out of sight beyond the thick brush.

"To die like this on Spica's world after all I came through!" he thought wildly in his darkening brain.

Other, more violent tremors ran through the huge, headless body of the monster. The grip of the great paw weakened and relaxed. Then Hammond saw a sight that made him doubt his sanity. The shell of the giant black creature's body began to split.

Its whole horny carapace and outer body were splitting wide open. Literally, its body seemed to fall apart. As Kirk Hammond staggered to his feet, he saw the ghastly and horrific final phase of the incredible spectacle. From out of the split remains of the monster's body climbed a far smaller creature of exactly the same species!

"Thol Orr!" yelled Hammond, stumbling dazedly backward.

The old Algolian answered that cry by driving his big power-dozer right through the brush.

The smaller black monster that had emerged from the broken body of the larger, scuttled hastily away through the brush.

"A mud-phoenix!" exclaimed Thol Orr. "Did it harm you?"

Kirk Hammond hastily related his incredible experience. The old Algolian shook his head.

"You have been extremely lucky. You happened to blunder into the mud-phoenix at the time of its rebirth, and that saved you."

He explained.

"They are a strange species indigenous to Kuum. They are sexless and reproduce by the weird cycle of sudden death and rebirth you saw. And they are dangerous when large. Didn't the men warn you that a musky odor meant that one of them was near?"

"The men warned me of nothing—they'd be only too glad to see a Vraman spy meet his death, I suppose," Hammond said bitterly.

He knew now that the others had deliberately let him walk into the monster. It

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proved how deep was their hostility toward him.

Their hostility and distrust were further exemplified when they returned to the prisoners' town that evening. The other men cheerfully talked over the day's work, swarmed off to the little drinking-shops, hailed friends in the dusking streets.

KIRK HAMMOND was left strictly alone and got nothing but unfriendly stares when he ventured forth. He finally gave it up and returned to his little room in the barracks.

Hammond found no change in that attitude in the days that followed. Only Thol Orr would talk with him. All the others had marked him as a spy. In his heart he could not entirely blame them. It was his own fault, for his folly had ruined the plan that Jon Wilson and his friends had so cherished. He was responsible for their being here.

"And that cursed brain-record made them think I was in love with Thayn Marden," he thought. "If it hadn't been for that—"

He determined that he would live it down, would conquer their distrust and somehow escape with them to continue the struggle to unseat the Vramen's domination.

Hammond, as the days passed, pondered many plans of escape. The great obstacle was the fact that few star-ships came to Kuum and, when they did, did not stay long. And they remained inside the force-walled compound, into which prisoners were never allowed.

Finally Kirk Hammond saw the glimmerings of a plan. He thought out every detail of it. There was just a chance it might work.

"But it's all useless unless the others follow me in the scheme. And they'd never listen to any plan that I proposed."

Three weeks of labor in the jungles made Kirk Hammond hardy and sunblackened and grimly accustomed to constant loneliness.

He had learned to drive the power-dozers and was taking one of them along the edge of the jungle to where Thol Orr and his crew awaited the replacement, when he heard a cry from inside the brush.

"Mud-phoenix! It's got—"

The yell was choked off. But it had been enough to make Hammond swing his machine around and hurl it straight into the forest.

He saw the black monster, almost as large as the one he had himself escaped on his first day in the jungle. It was just drawing a man's form under it to be ingested into its strange body.

Hammond hurled the heavy dozer right at the creature. The impact sent him flying from his seat and he crashed into the brush. He got up to find that the collision had killed the mud-phoenix. From beneath its body was squirming the man it had seized. Fouled with mud and slime but unhurt save for bruises, Rab Quobba looked astonishedly at Hammond.

"It was you who knocked out the beast? You saved my life, Hammond."

The big Vegan strode forward, gripped his hand.

"I've been a blasted fool."

"Then you don't believe that I'm any spy?" Hammond said.

"I never really thought you were, but Gurth Lund convinced some of us against our will," Quobba said ruefully. "I'll never doubt you again."

"Thanks, Quobba," Kirk Hammond said earnestly. "And now listen. You want to escape from here and go to Althar as we planned?"

THE Vegan stared.

"What makes you think we could?"

"We can if Jon Wilson and his men will all help. They can operate a star-ship if we seize one. But they won't trust me, no matter what you say. They would follow you, though."

"What's your plan?" Quobba asked quickly.

"There'll be a star-ship coming here soon," Hammond said. "Not a supply-ship but an unusual visit. I can *make* it come, you see."

He went on to tell the details of his plan for seizing that star-ship when it came.

Quobba shook his head.

"It'll be risky. And you'll take the biggest risk. But it might work. I'm for trying it and so will the rest."

"Then I'll start things going this very evening," Hammond declared. "Remember, you're to tell the others nothing about me being in on it. Just get them ready to follow you in a break, when I give the word."

"All right," Quobba nodded. "But what you're going to do tonight will make the others more bitter against you than ever."

Kirk Hammond well realized that, himself. Yet he was determined to go through

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with the initial step of his scheme.

When the police officers from the compound came through the barracks on their usual inspection trip that evening Hammond spoke to them.

"I have a request to make," he began, and saw that other prisoners were watching and listening suspiciously.

"What's your request, Hammond?" asked the officer he addressed.

"When I was sentenced to a term here," Kirk Hammond said, "they told me that, whenever I was willing to cooperate with the Vramen and assist them in their researches, I would be released from detention here on Kuum. I am willing now to do as they wish. Will you notify your authorities and also Thayn Marden, the Vramen representative on Earth?"

The officer was a Hooman and not without the prejudices of his people. He stiffened and looked at Hammond with unfriendly eyes.

"Very well. I'll send a message by undimensional telaudio to Earth at once."

When the officers had gone, Gurth Lund and the other prisoners looked at Hammond with a deep hatred surpassing their former hostility.

"So you are going to beg off and go back to the Vramen who sent you here?" raged Lund.

Hammond made no answer. There was so much raw hatred of him in the room that he felt the imminence of an explosion.

The police officer returned later.

"Your request has been granted by the Federated Suns officials at Earth. Thayn Marden, representing the Vramen, will come here to Kuum. If you prove your sincerity by answering her questions you will be taken back to Earth as a free man."

When the officer had again departed one of the furious Hoomen prisoners in the room muttered a threat that reached Hammond's ears.

"He will if he lives that long!"

CHAPTER XI

Inside the Force-Wall

COURAGEOUSLY Hammond knew that he had confirmed all the distrust and suspicions of the other Hoomen by his action. Only Quobba knew the truth.

The others bitterly regarded him as a proved traitor. Lund, he knew, would kill him if he had a chance. Even Iva Wilson passed stonily by him next morning when the men started for the jungle.

Only old Thol Orr remained unaffected by the general rage. He looked curiously at Hammond as they drove to the jungle.

"So you are going to cooperate with the Vramen? Well, perhaps that is for the best."

"You don't seem to hate the Vramen as much as the other Hoomen do," Hammond said.

The old Algolian shook his head.

"I'm a scientist, and the Vramen are very great scientists who are responsible for much of our progress in the last few thousand years."

"But you don't resent the fact that they hoard the secret of unlimited life for themselves so they can dominate the Hoomen's galactic civilization?"

Thol Orr shrugged.

"I suppose I do resent it a little. But the Vramen lead such hard, barren, loveless lives that I hardly envy them their immortality and power."

Kirk Hammond was extremely careful in the jungle that day and the days that followed. He knew that many of his enraged fellow-prisoners would be only too glad to see him meet with a fatal accident.

He found opportunities to confer secretly with Rab Quobba and Shawn Tammas. The little Mizarian, always the loyal shadow of his big Vegan friend, had been let into the secret.

Upon the eighth day, when they returned from the jungle at dusk, a police officer came into the barracks to Hammond.

"A ship has arrived from Earth. Thayn Marden of the Vramen is here and will question you about your request."

Hammond's pulse jumped. The moment upon which his whole precarious scheme depended had arrived. The others watched him with bitter hatred as he started out of the barracks. He glanced at Rab Quobba meaningly. The big Vegan played up to his cue and strode into the corridor after Hammond, swearing furiously.

"It's blasted good riddance of you!" Quobba bellowed. "I hope I never see your face again, you cursed traitor!"

But out in the corridor, Quobba dropped his voice and asked hastily:

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"Then it's now? Tonight?"

Hammond nodded swiftly.

"I'm going to try it. If I fail the rest of you will lose nothing."

He gave rapid directions.

"Get Wilson and the other men of our band to stroll with you near the compound. Then, if the force-wall is turned off, you can make a rush in through it at once."

The Vegan nodded swiftly.

"I've already told them that I have a plan for seizing a ship. They'll follow me."

The guard officer was waiting impatiently outside the barracks. Hammond followed him through the twilight to the compound. His escort made a signal to the guard in the tower atop the police building. A section of the force-wall died, and they stepped inside. The wall flamed up again behind them.

Kirk Hammond's eyes flew to the single star-ship that was parked on the tarmac. It was a small black cruiser, a blunt-nosed oval bulk.

ITS Hooman crew were talking idly with some of the police officers. They all looked curiously at Kirk Hammond as he was led inside the building. He looked keenly about the corridors inside as he was taken to an office. In the room the Sirian commandant of police was talking with Thayn Marden. Hammond's heart jumped as the Vraman girl turned and met his eyes. Again, her strange uncanny beauty struck him.

Slim in black shorts, her body shimmering with that faint pearly luminescence from white limbs to ashen blond hair, Thayn was as his mind had pictured her many times in the past weeks.

Her blue eyes searched his face.

"You are willing now to cooperate with our researches in exchange for your freedom?"

Kirk Hammond nodded.

"Yes. I might as well, for the other prisoners here think I'm a traitor to them anyway."

"If you will answer some preliminary questions to prove your sincerity I shall return with you to Earth," Thayn told him.

Hammond looked at the commandant.

"I've a certain condition to make. But it's for your ears alone."

The Sirian commandant looked doubtful at that, but Thayn Marden reassured him.

"It is quite safe to leave him with me. I have a shocker and the man is not dangerous."

The commandant nodded respectfully.

"As you wish. I shall have your ship refueled with copper for immediate return to Earth."

Kirk Hammond had already noticed the "shocker's" silver tube in Thayn's belt. He knew how swiftly she could use the weapon.

Thayn was looking at him curiously.

"Now what is the condition you have to make which you did not want him to hear?"

Hammond nerved himself for the part he had to play. Everything depended on his carrying it through until he got his chance.

"Thayn, it wasn't just freedom that made me agree to what you asked," he said earnestly. "It was to see you and be near you again."

"What do you mean?" the Vraman girl asked doubtfully.

"It was because I'm in love with you," Hammond said. "I'm the prize fool of the universe to be so, but I can't help it."

Thayn stiffened. A strange, strained look came into her beautiful white face at his avowal.

"That is madness! There can be no talk of love between you and me."

"Why not?" he demanded. "You may be immortal but you're still a girl and I love you."

"You don't know what you're saying!" she burst. "No Vraman can love or marry. It is one of the penalties of our life."

She had not doubted the truthfulness of his avowal. He had counted on that, had counted on that brain-record which had led her and the others to think him in love with her. He did not love her at all, Hammond told himself fiercely. He was lying, but the lie and the trick were just revenge for the trick she had used upon him weeks before.

He took a step toward her, speaking earnestly.

"Thayn, you can't mean that! What is there to prevent our being happy together?"

There was pain in her white face as she answered.

"I cannot tell you the reasons. But it is impossible."

She had never looked more beautiful than she did then, standing before him with that strange aching look in her face and eyes. Hammond found it almost fatally easy to pretend passion.

But he had not forgotten his purpose. He

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stepped closer, put his arms around her.

"Thayn, you must listen to me! There's nothing to stand between us—"

She tried to draw back, the look of strange misery haunting her blue eyes. Hammond's hand dropped to her slim waist and touched the silver tube in her belt. He suddenly snatched it out and sprang back. Thayn Marden looked at him, her face dead-white, stunned. "It was only a trick!"

"The same one you used on me!" Hammond flared savagely.

SHE opened her lips to shout. But before she could do so, he had levelled the shocker and pressed the stud on its back. He had questioned Quobba closely about these and other weapons. And what he had learned served him well now. From the muzzle of the little tube sprang a thin beam of pale radiance that hit Thayn's body squarely.

The Vraman girl collapsed to the floor without a sound, stunned by the electric shock that paralyzed her nervous system. Hammond found himself shaking, his own nerves at breaking pitch. Somehow he had not expected Thayn to react to his pretended avowal of love as she had. It had almost seemed that she—

"You're a fool!" he told himself savagely. "And you're likely to be a dead fool if you don't hurry."

He went to the door of the office and peered out, then slipped out into the corridor. He had noted a stair and he sprang up it at once. He met no one until he reached the second floor. It held the living quarters of the police officers and one was coming down the passage. Hammond dropped the man instantly with a flash of his shocker and ran on up the stair to the tower.

Two Hooman guards were lounging in the little tower-room. He drooped one with the shocker as they turned, but the other man cried out and grabbed for his energy-pistol. Then the shocker beam hit him. Hammond heard a sound of alarmed voices below in response to that cry.

"There may still be time," he gritted, running toward the switchboard that was the main object in the little room.

There was a bank of a dozen switches on it. He pulled them down, one after another, whirled to the window.

The force-wall had died! And the groups of Hoomen who had been loitering at a little distance outside it were now running forward into the compound. They were led by big, yelling Rab Quobba.

"The wall is down!" he heard the Sirian commandant shouting.

Hammond went down the stairs in leaps, as an uproar of battle broke from below. A fierce conflict was already going on in the lower floors. Quobba and Jon Wilson and the other prisoners had gained a surprise entrance before the police here could use their weapons.

A few energy-pistols roared and crackled in the corridors, and men shrieked. But Kirk Hammond, coming down behind the guards, swept them with the shocker and that decided the fight. They dropped in heaps.

The combat was soon over, the guards all stunned. Two Hoomen were dead and others had been wounded by pistol-blasts. Rab Quobba had a great burn on his cheek, and his eyes were flaming with battle-light.

"Hammond, you did it!" he bellowed. "We've got our ship now!"

Jon Wilson stared incredulously at Kirk Hammond.

"You opened the force-wall? But we thought you a traitor."

"You should be convinced at last that I'm not," Hammond said sharply.

They crowded around him, slapping his back, trying to express their excited emotion.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you being a spy," Gurth Lund said somberly. "Though I'll still never like any man who loves a Vraman!"

"I don't care whether you like me or not," Hammond retorted. "The thing to do is to get away from Kuum at once."

JON WILSON'S eyes flamed. "That ship out there will take us anywhere in the galaxy, and we can man it."

"Then it's ho for Althar!" bellowed Rab Quobba. "This is the chance we've been hoping for for years! The chance to find the secret of the Vramen's life and power!"

Shawn Tammas interposed a shrewd objection.

"That ship has the Vramen's device built into it, like all others. They can explode it if we venture into the forbidden region around Althar."

"I believe we can find a way around that obstacle," Jon Wilson said quickly. "We'll take Thayn Marden with us."

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Hammond looked troubled. Wilson seemed to understand his feelings for he added, "I give my word we'll not harm her. But I've a plan by which we can use her to get through the Vramen's safeguards."

The whole prison colony was in wild excitement as they made hasty preparations for departure.

Jon Wilson spoke aloud to the seething crowd.

"We can't take all of you. And my own group were selected and trained for just such an attempt as we are going to make."

"Luck send you reach Althar and the secret!" shouted a big Antarian.

Hammond found Thol Orr in the crowd.

"Thol, I want you to come with us. You know more of Corvus Cluster than any Hooman here."

The old Algolian looked doubtful, but he was unable to refuse the opportunity Hammond held out to him.

"I think it's a mad quest, this one of yours for the secret of immortality. But I would like to solve that strange radiation that puzzled me so years ago. I'll go. I believe it's a doomed voyage, but I have not long to live in any case."

"You and all other Hoomen will live unlimited lives if we succeed!" Hammond promised.

Iva Wilson was also among their complement, but he found no time to speak to her in the hurry of last-minute preparations. Wilson, Quobba and the other experienced star-ship men examined and prepared the ship. Every pound of copper possible was loaded in it as fuel for the atomic generators. Meanhile, the undimensional telaudio apparatus of the police was wrecked so no warnings could be sent out.

The guards and Thayn Marden still lay unconscious in the building. Kirk Hammond himself carried the Vraman girl into the ship and bound her carefully into a recoil-chair in one of the small cabins.

The feverish preparations were finished and Tammas and Quobba and the others trooped aboard. The big Vegan took the pilot-chair, while Lund and Wilson went below to start the atomic generators.

The jets roared and the ship rose from nighted Kuum. It shot out into clear space. And then its generators droned louder as it flew in the direction of the distant star-cluster which enclosed mysterious Althar and its great secret.

CHAPTER XII

Into the Sun-Swarm

THE incredible vault of starry space stretched before the bridge-room windows. Gazing into that vast, star-gemmed gloom, Kirk Hammond felt crushed by an agoraphobia such as he had never before experienced.

It was too big, too wide, too empty. He was still only a man of the Twentieth Century, and could not reconcile a mind still attuned to the brief horizons of Earth to the vast glooms and flaring abyssal lamps of the suns.

But Rab Quobba and Tammas and the others appeared in highest spirits as the ship drove faster. Quobba acted as pilot and the wizened little Mizarian as flight-engineer, and they seemed perfectly to understand the bewildering banks of controls and instruments.

"I'll throw in the space-split now and we'll really get going," the Vegan said.

He reached for a communicator and spoke through it to the generator-rooms deeper in the ship.

"Full power, Wilson. I'm putting on the drive."

The propulsion jets were throbbing steadily. But as Quobba slowly opened a big lever, the needles on the space-speed dials jumped to dizzy heights. Kirk Hammond began to understand a little. The jets were what drove the ship, but the space-split was what made its super-velocities possible.

"If we're actually splitting three-dimensional space ahead of us, how can we see space through our windows?" he asked.

"We are seeing by projected rays that shortcut the ordinary dimensions, as in the instantaneous undimensional telaudio. Those windows are now really vision-screens."

"Quobba, can we reach Corvus Cluster without the police network becoming aware of our course?"

"Sure we can unless we're unlucky enough to meet a patrol," Quobba answered. "The real trouble begins when we hit the Cluster."

"Corvus is completely uncharted and that will make it tough to navigate," added Tammas. "Besides, we don't know just where

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inside it Althar lies. *And* there'll be the Vraman to pass somehow."

"Thayn Marden will surely help us on that last problem rather than let the ship be destroyed," Hammond said. "I'll go back and see if she's come to yet."

When he entered the little cabin in which Thayn was confined he found her fully conscious and trying to break the bonds that held her in the recoil-chair.

She looked up at him, and her blue gaze was flaming upon his face.

"So you have stolen this star-ship? And you're heading toward Althar?"

"We are," Hammond said grimly. "And we're going to reach it and find the secret you Vramen have hoarded so long."

"You will never reach Althar," Thayn said swiftly. "You have no chance whatever and you will all perish if you try."

"You will perish with us, Thayn," he reminded her. "For your own sake, you will have to help us."

"You understand little of the Vramen if you think I would betray our greatest trust merely to save myself."

Kirk Hammond's hopes sank. He began to see how little they could count on the Vraman girl to aid them in any way whatever.

"Thayn, is it so wrong for us Hoomen to desire the secret of unlimited life and knowledge and power that *you* possess?" he demanded.

"It is wrong, terribly wrong," she replied. "If you knew everything you would not want to be immortal."

"What do you mean?"

SHE shook her blond head.

"I cannot explain without betraying the secret itself."

Hammond felt baffled.

"Mystery again? I'm convinced you Vramen make such a portentous mystery out of Althar simply to frighten away the Hoomen. But we'll not be frightened."

"It would be better if you were," Thayn said sadly. "You are throwing away your lives in a hopeless quest."

He went angrily out of the cabin and sent one of the Hoomen to guard the Vraman girl now that she was conscious. In the bridge-room he found Jon Wilson, feverish with excitement and hope as he peered into the blurred void. Iva was there too and looked questioningly at Hammond.

"Will Thayn help us to enter the Cluster?"

He shook his head.

"She says she will perish with us rather than help us."

"Then it looks bad for us," Quobba declared. "In the hull of this ship, as in all star-ships, is built the device the Vramen can explode by remote control. And they'll use it when we approach Althar."

"Couldn't we dig the thing out of the hull and get rid of it?" Hammond asked.

Tammas smiled.

"You underestimate the Vramen, lad. The thing is always built so that attempts to remove it will detonate it."

Jon Wilson looked thoughtful.

"I had an idea by which we might get past that obstacle if we had Thayn along. And it might work."

He turned to Thol Orr.

"Thol, you've been in the Cluster. You were sent to Kuum for entering the forbidden region. Tell me, did the Vramen first challenge you by telaudio when you were captured?"

THE old Algolian nodded.

"That's what happened. I was trying to trace the radiation I was studying when there came a telaudio challenge. When I couldn't answer it the Vramen ordered me to remain motionless in space or they'd explode my cruiser. They sent a ship out that took me prisoner and turned me over to the Government for trial."

"Then," Jon Wilson reasoned, "if Thayn Marden would answer their telaudio challenge, they would let us pass and we could approach and land on Althar."

"There's no hope of that," Hammond told him. "She won't do it, no matter what threats you make to her."

"Yet I've an idea by which we could get around her refusal," Wilson said. He looked around. "There should be a stereo-cine-camera in this ship for star-charting. And I'll also need a sound recorder."

They watched uncomprehendingly as Jon Wilson began setting up the two instruments when he had found them. Hours passed as the ship rocked on through the void toward the star-swarm of danger and mystery. Hammond slept and then tried to learn from little Tammas something of the piloting of the ship.

It was far too complicated for him to learn much about it, he found. Meanwhile Wilson

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still worked, setting up his instruments in a semi-concealed position below the control panel. An intolerable tension grew in them all as Corvus Cluster expanded from a misty star into a great ball of shining specks. Each speck was a star and there were hundreds of them.

Kirk Hammond stared, fascinated. That great hive of swarming suns held peril and enigma. In it were uncharted mazes of meteor drift and dark clouds and rogue planetoids. In it, also, was Althar.

Thol Orr looked forth with him.

"We will reach the edge of the cluster tomorrow. Very soon after we enter, we'll be challenged."

"Wilson still says he has something that will enable us to pass the challenge," Hammond answered doubtfully.

On the next day, when the great cluster filled half the heavens ahead of them, Jon Wilson announced his preparations were complete.

"Now bring Thayn Marden in here," he directed.

Thayn's eyes flew to the huge cluster of flaring suns bulking in the vision-screen windows, as she entered the bridge. But the blond Vraman girl showed no sign of emotion.

She stood facing Jon Wilson calmly.

"Will you reconsider your refusal to help us win entrance to Althar?" Wilson demanded.

"I will not. You will all be doomed if you venture inside the cluster."

Jon Wilson went on, plying her with more demands. Hammond frowned. It didn't make sense, for she only answered with firm refusals.

"Take her back to her cabin," Wilson finally said.

When that had been done, the Hooman leader looked at them triumphantly.

"I think we now have a way to pass the Vramen's challenge."

He took out the stereo-cinecamera and sound recorder which had been concealed beneath the banks of controls in the front of the room.

"These instruments were making a complete cine-stereo film of Thayn Marden and everything she said."

"What good will that do us?" Rab Quobba demanded.

"I am going to cut this film into separate bits, each containing a word or two, and then piece it together again," Wilson explained. "The pieced-together version will give a stereo-picture of Thayn Marden saying exactly what we want her to say."

"And you'll use that to answer the telaudio when the Vramen challenge us?" cried Hammond. "Wilson, it may really work!"

"If it doesn't," Wilson said grimly, "we'll never know it for the ship will be instantly exploded around us."

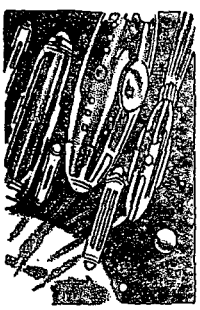
The work of piecing together the film was painstaking. It was hardly finished by the time they reached the edge of the cluster. Thol Orr had been poking the spectroscopes and other instruments toward the middle of the cluster.

"There it is—the unique stellar radiation that I tried to trace into the Cluster years ago!" the old Algolian exclaimed. "A radiation concentrated in certain octaves of the electromagnetic spectrum, like no other star's!"

"There's no time now for your scientific research," Wilson said hastily. "I want you to set up a direction-finder and hook it to our telaudio receiver. You're a radiation expert and can do that."

[*Turn page*]

NEXT ISSUE'S HALL OF FAME CLASSIC!



WHEN PLANETS CLASHED

A Complete Novelet of Interplanetary Battle

By

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A MASTERPIECE OF SCIENCE FICTION!

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KIRK HAMMOND thought he understood.

"When the Vramen challenge us, that will give us the direction of Althar?"

"That's the idea. Otherwise we would simply have to hunt blindly for the world of the Vramen in this jungle of suns."

His vivid description of the cluster was not exaggerated. It was truly a jungle of suns that bulked all across the black sky before the rushing ship.

Green, smoldering red, pure white, brilliant blue, blazed the stars that seethed together in this mighty swarm. Though they were really great distances from each other, the immense size of the Corvus Cluster made its stars seem crowded closely. The ship, with Rab Quobba at the controls, drove past the fringe of suns at the rim of the swarm. Before them, around them, the whole sky was now a bewildering maze of blazing stars.

"It's like piloting in a madhouse of space!" muttered the big Vegan. "No charts, no bearings and the indicators going crazy."

The tell-tales on the control panels were buzzing and ringing and bobbing to show meteoric drift and other dangerous debris around them.

Quobba coolly drove the ship at slightly reduced speed, continually changing course to avoid unseen masses of drift or great coils of black cloud that reached like octopus tentacles between the hiving stars. Meteor-dust rattled on the hull like the crash of hail.

Suddenly the telaudio buzzed sharply and in its square screen appeared the figure of a Vraman—a tall, handsome man seated at a switchboard in a room of crowded apparatus.

"State the identity of your ship immediately," he ordered sharply.

"They've spotted us by their locators," said Jon Wilson. "Stand back out of sight of the telaudio, all of you."

Hammond and the others did so. Wilson switched on their own telaudio transmitter and at the same time turned on the stereofilm projector he had prepared. Directly in front of the telaudio appeared the life-like stereoscopic image of Thayn Marden, facing the transmitter.

"This is Thayn Marden, returning to Althar," her image spoke. "There are none except Vramen on this ship."

The image of Thayn spoke jerkily, but otherwise was completely realistic. They waited tensely. But the Vraman in the screen appeared to suspect nothing.

"Very well—you are permitted to continue, of course," he said and switched off.

"By the devils of Vega, it worked!" exclaimed Rab Quobba gleefully. "If it hadn't the ship would be blown to atoms by now."

"It may still be blown if they discover the deception before we reach Althar," Wilson said. "Did you get a direction-bearing, Thol?"

Thol Orr nodded as he examined the instrument he had attached to the telaudio.

"This will give you the course to Althar."

Rab Quobba veered the ship to follow the bearing. For hours Kirk Hammond watched as their vessel plunged on through the starry masses of the Corvus Cluster. Old Thol Orr finally spoke puzzledly to Hammond.

"I can't understand this. The strange radiation I've been trying to trace comes from exactly the same direction we're following, the same as Althar!"

"Do you suppose it has any connection with the Vramen's world?" Hammond asked wonderingly.

"I don't know," muttered the old Algolian. "But it's getting rapidly stronger and I am beginning to suspect something incredible."

Two hours later, the old scientist uttered a cry and pointed ahead as the ship emerged from a belt of dark cloud into an open space.

"Gods of Algol! Look at that star!"

They were deep in the center of the great Corvus Cluster. And here was a space less crowded with suns. At the very heart of this space, encompassed all around by the swarming hosts of suns, shone a single strange star such as Kirk Hammond had never seen before.

It burned in weird, opalescent glory. It appeared to have no single hue, but red, green, violet and golden yellow spun in its light like the writhing colors of a huge fire-opal. It was uncanny, hypnotic, in its alien splendor as it spun here at the heart of the cluster, bathing in its rays a single planet a little smaller than Earth.

"The *star!*" choked Thol Orr. "The source of the strange radiation that always mystified me! A star that is somehow a generator pouring out floods of unique, hard radiation such as no other star emits. Rays largely bunched in the octaves of the spectrum beyond the gamma rays!

"Even weak radiation of that type has

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deep biophysical effects on living matter. Think what must be the effect on life of the furious torrent of the radiation from that star!"

Awe fell upon Kirk Hammond and on the others.

"You mean that the radiation of that star may be what gives immortality?"

"It must be!" cried Thol Orr. "It is a Star of Life, and that planet that swings in its rays must be the world of Althar!"

CHAPTER XIII

On Mysterious Althar

SUCH a supposition was too staggering for any of them to take in at once. They had expected many things, but none of their possibilities had included this overwhelming one.

A Star of Life? A star whose radiance was so unprecedentedly chargedly with torrents of unique hard radiation that it produced on living bodies the deep, subtle biological effects that resulted in immortality?

"It can't be," whispered Jon Wilson, staring wildly at the opalescent glory ahead. "And yet—"

"It would explain everything!" burst Gurth Lund excitedly. "It would explain why the men who first found this star and world became immortal when they felt its rays!

"Yes, and it would explain why all the Vramen go back for part of each year to Althar to renew their immortality. They go there to bathe in the rays of that star!"

Rab Quobba looked incredulously.

"But our ship is already inside the rays of the star and I don't feel any differently."

"It would have no effect on us in the ship," Thol Orr reminded. "All star-ships have a hull-lining of tungsten gauze to block out radiation that might be harmful."

"But if it's true, all we have to do is land on Althar and bathe in those rays to become immortal," said Hammond dazedly.

Iva Wilson pressed close to him, trembling. "I'm frightened. There's something evil about that star."

Jon Wilson made decision.

"We'll land on Althar. But we must avoid the Vramen's citadel, wherever that is."

"Bring Thayn Marden here again," he ordered. "She may talk now that we have reached the forbidden world."

Thayn's face was deathly white when she was brought into the bridge-room.

"So you have reached the Star of Life? That seals your doom. You must never be allowed to return with the secret."

"We'll return, all right," rasped Wilson. "Why, when the galaxy hears of this star whose rays give unending youth, Althar will be crowded with people who will come from every star."

"That must not be!" Thayn exclaimed. "You think you have learned all our secrets, but you do not know what horror and danger waits on Althar."

"Thayn, we're going to land there and you can't stop us," Kirk Hammond reasoned with her. "Won't you give up this futile resistance and tell us about this world and where it's safe to land?"

Thayn spoke, after a few moments of thought.

"Very well, I see that I may as well tell you. Land your ship in the high mountains in the north of Althar. That is the only safe place."

"Then that," said Wilson grimly, "is the one place where we won't land. Obviously, she'd like us to come down there because it's where the Vramen would capture us."

The swift expression that crossed Thayn's face proved that the Hooman leader had guessed right.

Thol Orr had been peering through a telescope at the planet that swung in the weird opalescent blaze of the uncanny star.

"There appear to be strange forests of some kind over the equatorial regions of the planet."

"Then land in the forests," Wilson directed.

"You must not!" Thayn Marden cried instantly. "That is the country of the Third Men and it means disaster if you land there."

"The Third Men? Disaster? That's all bluff," Wilson snapped. "It's quite evident from the fact that you're afraid we'll land there, that it's the very place we should land."

Kirk Hammond was troubled by the extreme agony of spirit that showed in the Vraman girl's beautiful face.

"I don't know, Wilson. There may actually be danger of some kind there."

"Don't listen to Hammond. He's still in love with the girl," said Gurth Lund harshly.

Rab Quobba shrugged.

"We're taking a chance wherever we land

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on Althar. We might as well land in the forests."

The ship was soon roaring through atmosphere as the dull green surface of the forbidden planet rushed up toward them.

GROTESQUE and alien was the great forest that stretched below. It was a forest of huge tree-mosses, enormous billowy cushions of dark green that towered up for scores of feet. The star-ship dropped between the great mosses, and came to rest in a sunlit, grassy glade. The drone of the atomic generators died into silence.

Jon Wilson's eyes were blazing.

"Althar!" he whispered. "We've reached it at last, the key to age-old mystery!"

"Testers show breathable atmosphere outside," reported Shawn Tammas from the instrument panel.

Wilson turned eagerly.

"Then open the doors. We are going out into the rays of that sun—going out to become immortal!"

"Wait!" cried Thayn Marden. "I beg of you not to go out into that radiation without protection. If it once strikes your bodies, it will blast your lives in a way I cannot tell."

Gurth Lund scoffed.

"It's only another attempt to scare us. Of course she doesn't want us to step out into the rays of immortality!"

But Iva Wilson surprised them.

"I believe she may be telling the truth," the Hooman girl said slowly. "Even if she doesn't care about us, I don't think she wants anything to happen to Kirk Hammond."

Hammond was a little startled by that, and glanced quickly at Thayn's drawn, white face. Was it possible that was true?

"We might as well take precautions until we learn more about these rays," he said. "Wearing protection can't hurt us and we can take it off as soon as we're certain the rays are really the secret of life."

"You will need ray-proof shields for your bodies and skulls," Thayn Marden said quickly.

Hammond turned to Thol Orr.

"You spoke of a tungsten gauze interlining that shields the ship from radiation? Couldn't we use some of that?"

It was the device they finally adopted. The inner plates of the hull were opened in a fuel-room where the break in the radiation shields would not be noticed. Shawn Tammas deftly fitted sections of the ray-proof gauze into gleaming garments that went over their middle bodies beneath their clothing, and into small caps to protect their skulls.

"Now," said Jon Wilson eagerly when the work was finished, "we can go out."

The door opened and they stepped out into warm, dry air that bore an exhalation of strange scents as it whispered through the great moss-forest. All around them rose the huge, grotesque bulks of the green mosses, like enormous cushions. Between the towering growths shot shafts of the weird opalescent radiance of the dazzling Star of Life.

There was an uncanny absence of small living creatures. No birds or even insects flitted through the somber moss-forest. And the silence was deep and brooding. They stood in an open space, bathed in that strange changing radiance and looking up at the sun. The opalescent star blazed and winked and changed in hue, until they had to turn their dazzled eyes away.

It was decided to reconnoiter their surroundings. Hammond and Quobba started eastward through the forest while others went in different directions.

"Look at those mountains!" the Vegan exclaimed when he and Hammond had climbed to a higher point in the forest.

High and blue and distant in the north rose great peaks clustered closely together, so far away they seemed misty and vague. Over the distant peaks brooded a strange rosy glow visible even in the glare of day, a pulsing, mysterious radiance.

"There is something up there in the mountains that produces that weird glow," Hammond said tensely. "It could be the citadel of the Vramen. Thayn tried to get us to land there."

THEY went back to the ship. The others had seen nothing but illimitable moss-forest. But Jon Wilson's face lengthened when he heard the report of Hammond and Quobba.

"The last think we want is for the Vramen to learn of our presence on Althar!" he exclaimed.

"Then we'd better stay hidden here in the forest while we're studying this radiation," Hammond said. "I've an idea about that."

They went back into the star-ship, and Kirk Hammond spoke to Thol Orr.

"You're a radiation expert, Thol. If you analyzed the exact frequencies of this stel-

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lar radiation, could you reproduce it from artificial generators later?"

"I think that I could," the old Algolian said thoughtfully. "Though it wouldn't be easy to produce artificial rays of such strength."

"Then this is what we should do," Hammond proposed earnestly. "We'll stay here long enough for Thol Orr to study and analyze the radiation of the star. If it is really those rays that give immortality, he'll learn enough about them to reproduce them in the laboratory.

"We can slip away from here before the Vramen find us, go back and spread the secret of the rays all over the galaxy. That will break the Vramen's monopoly on immortality, and thus destroy the basis of their domination over the Hoomen."

"Your plan is good, Hammond," Jon Wilson approved warmly. "And once we're sure the rays can't harm us, we can bathe in them before we leave and go back as immortals ourselves."

Kirk Hammond felt a sense of unreality, at that. It seemed impossible that he should ever become immortal, living on for century after century as the Vramen did. Yet already he had lived more than ten thousand years.

If their belief was correct, he had only to bathe in the opalescent rays of that strange sun to alter his bodily structure in every cell and become practically undying. Thayn Marden had been listening, and her face expressed deeper distress when she heard their decision.

"You must not stay here longer," she said desperately. "I told you before, this forest is part of the realm of the Third Men. You are in deadly danger."

"Who are the Third Men?" Hammond demanded.

The Vraman girl hesitated.

"I can't tell you that without disclosing more than you should know. But this I will tell you—there are other races here on Althar beside Vramen! And most dangerous of them are the Third Men. Their instruments may already have told them of our landing here. If so they will come, and you will be powerless to resist them."

The deep dread on Thayn's beautiful face affected Kirk Hammond. He could not believe entirely that she was lying.

"It's all designed to scare us," Gurth Lund said contemptuously. Naturally she is frantic at what we plan to do."

They paid no further attention to the Vraman girl, but gathered around Thol Orr as he began setting up instruments for analysis of the strange stellar radiation. Every star-ship, it seemed, was well equipped with apparatus for the assistance of navigation in unfamiliar regions of the galaxy. Since these were Hooman apparatus, the Algolian was familiar with them.

Kirk Hammond felt a growing tension as he waited with the others for Thol Orr to finish his studies. He knew they were on the very verge of at last discovering that secret which had so long been forbidden to the galaxy, and which they had risked and endured much to find.

And Thayn's warnings had affected his nerves. He told himself that it was all mere subterfuge on her part, that instead of warning them of danger she would be only too glad to see them destroyed even though it meant death for herself. And yet—

"I must be going a little batty from strain, to be falling for her tricks again," Hammond told himself disgustedly.

Thol Orr seemed to grow more and more puzzled and disturbed as he worked with his spectroscopic and other instruments.

"There's something sinister about this radiation," he muttered. "It *could* possibly affect the cell-structure so deeply as to cause a change that would mean unending cell-life. But it would also, in that case, bring about other and less desirable changes."

"Do you mean that the radiation really is somehow dangerous even though it confers immortality?" Wilson asked perplexedly.

"That doesn't make sense," Hammond declared.

Thol Orr started to explain, but the words never left his lips. At that moment, an absolute darkness clapped down upon them without warning. They were plunged into a rayless night as though they had all been stricken blind.

Thayn Marden cried out to them.

"The Third Men are here! Take the ship up at once!"

Kirk Hammond was bewildered, and heard exclamations of amazement and fear from the others.

"Someone's coming through the door into the ship!" yelled Rab Quobba's voice in the blackness. "They—"

His warning shout ended in a groan and they heard the thudding crash of a falling body. There was a rush of unseen feet into

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the ship, voices shouting, the sound of quick breathing. Iva screamed. Kirk Hammond started toward her and was grabbed by unseen hands. The lightless ship seemed full of uncanny assailants.

CHAPTER XIV

Alien City

HAMMOND struck blindly. But next moment, something that felt like a living loop of flesh wound tightly around his body and pinioned his arms and legs.

He fell heavily to the floor. Lying there, he could hear the others being overcome as rapidly by their unknown attackers.

"Ghosts or devils!" Shawn Tammas was sputtering in the blackness. "They've got my—"

There was the sound of the little Mizarian falling, punctuating his shout. Then a sharp voice spoke in cold, resonant accents.

"They are all accounted for," it declared. "Lift the Veil."

There was the sound of a switch clicking somewhere just outside the ship's open door. The utter darkness abruptly vanished. And with the return of the daylight their attackers appeared in full view around them.

There were two score men in all, crowded in here with the now bound and helpless band of Hoomen. But they were no men such as Kirk Hammond had ever seen.

"Gods of Vega!" breathed Rab Quobba, from where he lay bound. "What *are* they?"

"The Third Men!" exclaimed Thayn in accents of despair.

Hammond stared unbelievingly. These attackers who had come under shield of sudden darkness were human. But they were far stranger even than the Vramen. They seemed a completely different species of humanity.

They were seven feet in average height, tall, superbly statured men who wore short, close fitting, dark tunics and whose white bodies shone with an even deeper radiance than the faint luminescence of the Vramen.

They were completely hairless, these Third Men—their skulls smooth and bald, their eyes browless and lashless. Their hands ended not in five fingers but in six sprouting boneless members like tentacles, capable of manipulations far beyond those of ordinary hands.

Most uncanny of all to Kirk Hammond were their faces. By human standards those radiant faces were regular and beautiful. But they were unhuman in their almost complete lack of ordinary signs of emotion. They were the cold, masklike faces of alien gods. One who seemed their leader spoke authoritatively.

"These people are obviously Hoomen from the outside who have somehow managed to reach Althar."

One of the Third Men spoke quickly to the leader.

"Mar Kann, one of them is a Vraman! This girl!"

The leader called Mar Kann strode toward the chair in which Thayn Marden was bound. His opaque eyes swiftly examined her bonds.

"So, you have been a prisoner of these Hoomen? How did you come to be in their hands?"

Thayn had dread in her blue eyes but she remained stonily silent as she faced the towering Third Man. Mar Kann turned back to the Hoomen, who lay helpless. They had been bound by loops like uncanny pink ropes of living flesh.

"Where did you capture the Vraman girl and why did you come here?" he demanded.

Kirk Hammond's anger made him answer boldly.

"We came hunting for the secret of immortality for our people."

"The Vramen are our enemies," Jon Wilson added hopefully, "and that is why the girl Thayn Marden is our captive. It seems that the Vramen are your enemies, too."

MAR KANN'S godlike face darkened slightly.

"That is true. The Vramen have long thwarted my people and held us prisoned on this world."

He seemed to think swiftly.

"If you are their enemies, you should be our friends. And I think we can help you attain the immortality you seek, for we would like to see all races as immortal as ourselves and the Vramen."

"You Third Men are undying too, then?" Wilson asked wonderingly.

Mar Kann nodded curtly.

"We are."

He went on to ask a question.

"Will you go peacefully with us to our city Vonn? There our director, Holl Gormon, can come to terms with you on what you seek."

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Jon Wilson looked excitedly at the others.

"We'll do it! These people are the Vramen's enemies and are going to help us."

Thayn Marden uttered an exclamation.

"Make no bargains with the Third Men! They represent a terrible danger, not only to my people but—"

"Silence that girl," Mar Kann said coldly.

A third Man whipped one of the pink pseudo-living ropes around Thayn's lips. It tightened of its own accord, gagging her. Mar Kann drew a small tube from his belt and with it touched the bonds that held Kirk Hammond and the other Hoomen. Hammond felt the pseudo-living ropes relax and fall away. He and Rab Quobba and the others scrambled to their feet.

"We will go now to Vonn," said Mar Kann. "Do not worry about your ship. I will leave men here to guard it and they will hide it with the Veil."

Hammond felt disturbed and oppressed as he followed the others out of the star-ship with the Third Men. His eyes were on Thayn's blond head as she was marched along ahead of them by two of the giant, godlike men. He had received a strong impression of the hatred directed at her by these men.

"But what difference can it make to me?" Hammond thought doggedly. "She's proved her enmity to us over and over."

Wilson and Gurth Lund and most of the other Hoomen were in a seventh heaven of excitement and hope. But Quobba and little Shawn Tammas looked less elated.

"I don't like the look of these Third Men," the wizened Mizarian muttered. "They just don't look human, to me."

Quobba shrugged.

"If they're enemies of the Vramen that's all we need to know. Though I admit they give me the creeps, too."

Outside the ship were several other Third Men with a small apparatus cased in a black plastic box.

Mar Kann spoke briefly to these.

"Remain here and guard the ship. Cast the Veil over it."

The others nodded, and one turned switches. Looking back, Hammond was amazed to see these men and the star-ship vanish suddenly from sight. They simply became invisible.

"Then the Veil is the means of invisibility you used to attack us?" Hammond asked the Third Man.

Mar Kann nodded slightly.

"It is an ionic shield designed to refract around itself all electromagnetic rays, not only light-rays but also the radiolocator beams and spy-rays of the Vramen. Inside the shield, of course, there is absolute darkness."

In the forest not far away were waiting four slim fliers. They were long tubular craft, whose bodies were of black plastic instead of metal.

Into one of these Hammond, Iva, Wilson and a few others of the Hoomen followed Mar Kann. Another Third Man took his place at a simple control-panel in the front of the machine. The plastic flier apparently did not operate by atomic power for there was no drone of generators when it started. Instead, it rose smoothly and in absolute silence, and then flew westward at high speed over the moss-forest.

Hammond felt a little bewildered by the absence of metal and atomic power as compared with the scientific powers these Third Men had already displayed.

"Your science seems to have reached as high or higher a development than that of the Vramen," he said to Mar Kann.

The Third Man answered contemptuously.

"The Vramen are but children beside us in mentality and scientific knowledge."

"If that's so, how have they been able to prevent your people from leaving this world?"

"They have not done so by their *own* powers, you may be sure of that," was the reply.

KIRK HAMMOND was puzzled by that answer. It seemed that they had only begun to penetrate the mysteries of Althar.

"Why is it that you are called the Third Men?" he asked after a moment.

Mar Kann looked at him sharply.

"I cannot make further explanations. Holl Gormon, our director, will elucidate matters further."

After an hour's flight at great speed above the grotesque moss-forests, the four plastic fliers rushed over an open plain. It was lighted by the opalescent glory of the setting Star of Life. A somber black city rose upon the plain, a square, stark metropolis of severely geometrical design.

"So that is your city Vonn?" exclaimed Jon Wilson to the Third Men, startled.

The city Vonn was a mass of black cement buildings surrounded by a heavy wall. The

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flat-roofed structures rose in concentric squares around a square, massive black mass that was highest of all.

The place was depressing in its severity of outline and its lack of softening parks and gardens. It brooded darkly in the opalescent sunset as the fliers swept low above its streets.

Men and women—the women as unhuman in stature and appearance as the men—were passing in the streets or could be glimpsed working in glittering rooms that might be factories or laboratories. There appeared to be no loiterers or chatting groups, no sign of relaxation or pleasure.

Something else struck Kirk Hammond as strange about the place. Nowhere in its dark streets did he see any children. Childlessness added somehow to the somberly oppressive effect of the city Vonn. The fliers swept down and landed amid similar craft in a paved court beside that massive central building.

Mar Kann spoke curtly.

"Holl Gormon has already been notified of our coming and will be awaiting us. You will follow me."

As they went with him into the building and through shadowy black cement corridors, Kirk Hammond asked another question.

"Holl Gormon is the head of your government?"

Mar Kann looked at him disdainfully.

"We have no 'government'. Holl Gorman has the most efficient brain of any of us, and therefore he naturally gives all orders concerning public matters."

Hammond didn't like that. These superintellectual Third Men seemed even farther removed from ordinary humanity than the Vramen. They entered a medium-sized chamber. At a desk whose face was crowded with screen-grids, switches and lenses sat one of the Third Men.

Holl Gormon, director of the race, appeared little different in general mold from the rest of his people, but the intellectual power in his cold face gave an even more chilling impression.

"You are welcome to Vonn," he told the Hoomen crisply. "The more so because you bring what we have wanted above all else—a Vraman prisoner."

"The Vraman girl is our prisoner," Hammond reminded him.

Holl Gormon looked at him with the expression of an austere man regarding a defiant small boy.

"Of course, I understand that," he replied. "But I am quite sure you will find there is no need of distrusting us.

"Mar Kann has already telepathed me information"—Hammond realized now how word had been sent ahead—"that you Hoomen come here seeking the secret of immortality. We Third Men are in perfect sympathy with your ambition."

"Is it really the opalescent sun of this world whose rays bring immortality?" Hammond asked quickly.

"You have guessed it," Holl Gormon replied. "The Star of Life is a star unique in the whole galaxy. It is a gigantic generator of peculiar hard radiation, due to the presence inside the star of quantities of radioactive matter in unprecedented percentages.

"Men age and die because their body cells deteriorate so that they cannot renew themselves. This unique, hard radiation has a polarizing effect that makes the cells capable of renewing themselves indefinitely. There is no deterioration with age as is ordinarily the case. So that anyone who subjects himself periodically to the Star's rays cannot die."

"Could those peculiar octaves of hard radiation be duplicated and produced artifically?" old Thol Orr asked.

HOLL GORMON nodded before he replied.

"It could be done. We shall be glad to help you design ray-generators that can bring immortality to every Hooman in the galaxy."

Jon Wilson's gaunt face glowed.

"If you help us accomplish that we'll do anything you ask in return! For that would end the Vramen's domination over us."

The Third Man glanced at Thayn Marden, whose slim figure stood defiant, even though she was still bound and gagged.

"The Vramen are our deadly enemies also," he said in hard tones. "They are far beneath us in mentality and knowledge, but have prevented us from leaving Althar to carry the gift of immortality to the rest of the galaxy."

Kirk Hammond voiced again that doubt that had puzzled him when he had talked to Mar Kann.

"If you're beyond the Vramen in science how can they prevent you from leaving Althar?"

"To leave would require star-ships, and

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star-ships must have atomic generators and copper fuel," Holl Gormon replied. "And there is almost no copper or any other metal on this world. That is due to the peculiar chemical constitution of the star which gave it birth."

"The Vramen bring their metals and copper fuel from outside to their city, Sharanna, in the mountains," he added. "Only by seizing their ships and copper there could we hope to leave this world."

"Can't you do that if your weapons and powers are so much above theirs?" Hammond asked skeptically.

Holl Gormon looked at him coldly.

"I said our science was far beyond theirs and it is. But though the Vramen are inferior to us, they have one weapon which we have never been able to conquer.

"It is called the Barrier and it is a belt of mind-destroying vibrations which surround their city, Sharanna. It was not invented by the Vramen themselves for such an invention would be far beyond them. It was invented by the Fourth Men, another race who live on Althar and hate us. They gave it to the Vramen to use against us."

Kirk Hammond felt more and more bewildered. They had expected to find the citadel of the immortal Vramen here on Althar. But they had not expected to find other races.

And now it seemed there were at least two others—these super-intellectual Third Men and another mysterious race they called the Fourth Men.

And these others and the Vramen were apparently tangled in complicated hostility and warfare!

What was their hostility about? Holl Gormon evaded that question.

"That is too complicated to explain now. The point is, are you willing to help us crush the Vramen so that we can give immortality to all the galaxy?"

Jon Wilson and the others replied quickly in the affirmative, Hammond himself a little more slowly.

"Then," said the Third Man, "you can help us overcome the weapon of the Vramen, the Barrier. This Vraman girl must know much about its operation. We can extract the knowledge from her."

Kirk Hammond looked uncertainly at Thayn. He knew she was his enemy in this struggle, but he didn't like the idea of turning her over to deadly foes.

"The Vraman girl will not be harmed?" he asked.

"Of course not," answered Holl Gormon coldly. "Mind-reading is child's play for us. We do not even need to use mechanical brain-recorders since our telepathic powers are sufficient to probe lesser minds."

Jon Wilson spoke quickly.

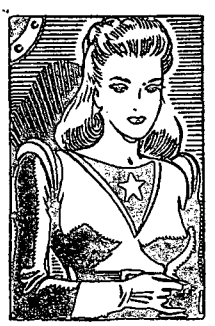
"Then you are at liberty to question the girl."

Holl Gormon's cold eyes showed a faint trace of satisfaction.

"Take her back to the Psychological Department, Mar Kann. Tomorow we will extract from her everything she knows about the Barrier. She cannot understand its scientific details, but what she has seen of its operation should enable our own scientists at last to deduce its principles and devise means of overcoming it."

Thayn Marden was led by the guards out of the chamber toward the back of the great building. She flashed a last glance at Kirk Hammond from the door. It made him uneasy, for in it he read supernal dread and appeal.

[*Turn page*]



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CHAPTER XV

The Fight with the Machine

FOR some unknown reason, Hammond was disturbed by the agony of that unspoken appeal. As Thayn disappeared, he turned back to Holl Gormon.

"You promise that the girl will not be harmed in any way?" he asked sharply, again.

The Third Man nodded curtly.

"You shall see her for yourself tomorrow when the questioning is over. Will that satisfy you?"

Hammond nodded slowly. But he still felt uncomfortable about the whole matter.

"You Hoomen will be our guests and our allies in conquering Sharanna and the Vramen," Holl Gormon went on. "Suitable quarters will be assigned you here in Vonn."

He touched a switch. To their surprise, it was a machine-servant that answered. The thing was a heavy plastic box with jointed arms, which rolled into the office on its wheels and spoke in a rasping monotone.

"Your orders?"

"Conduct these people to the west suite on the third floor," Holl Gormon instructed.

The machine-servant turned and started to roll out of the room, saying tonelessly, "Will you please follow me?"

"It will take you to your quarters," Holl Gormon said to them. "I shall confer with you again later tonight."

Kirk Hammond unwillingly followed with Wilson and Iva and the others. There was something curt about their dismissal that he did not like. The machine-servant took them to a lift, up to the third floor and into a suite of connecting rooms that looked across the flat black roofs of sunset-lighted Vonn.

"These are your rooms." The machine spoke raspingly. "You will find the nutrition-dispensary buttons beside each door. The red button will summon one of us to hear your commands."

The thing rolled away. The Hoomen looked wonderingly around the rooms. They were sternly austere, furnished with padded plastic couches, a few square chairs and nothing else.

The somber effect was increased by the black walls. The Star of Life, sinking in wondrous glory beyond the city, shot its last opalescent rays into the chambers. Big, uninhibited Rab Quobba broke the silence to vent his impressions of the place.

"The whole city is about as cheerful as a tomb and these Third Men are more domineering than the Vramen. They look at us as if we were animals."

"I didn't like the way they spoke of the Vramen as of low mentality," Hammond answered uneasily. "If they think that of them, what must they think of us?"

Jon Wilson was too flushed with the triumph of his dreams to listen to forebodings.

"They are going to be our allies against the Vramen, and what powerful allies they will be! Just think, we'll go back with the secret of those rays of life to give to everybody in the galaxy!"

Old Thol Orr, who had been silent and thoughtful, spoke up now.

"Just who can be the Fourth Men to whom they referred?"

Hammond shook his head.

"It's all a mystery. Whoever the Fourth Men are, they're hostile to these people and must be at least equal to them in science to have devised a weapon that has stopped them."

He was struck by the brooding look on Thol Orr's face, and asked the old Algolian a question.

"You've got some theory about the Fourth Men?"

Thol Orr shook his head.

"Just a suspicion, no more." His face became somber. "But if what I suspect is true, then these Third Men and the so-called Fourth Men are easily explained, and the explanation means we will *not* give immortality to the galaxy."

"That's all nonsense and I don't want to hear any more of it," Jon Wilson said angrily. "Think of all we've endured since we banded together on Earth to win that secret for our people! Now that it's in our grasp we're not going to turn defeatist for no reason."

TWILIGHT came, and light came on in the building. It was a blue, sourceless light that seemed pumped somehow out through the whole city. It added a final touch of the uncanny to the black, brooding metropolis. Kirk Hammond shared nutritive liquids drawn from the automatic dispenser in each room. Then he drifted to the farthest room of the suite and stood looking out over the blue-lit city.

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His thoughts were on Thayn Marden. She was somewhere in the building, and on the next day the Third Men would use their mastery of mental powers to wrest from her the secret of the Vraman defense. He knew he should be glad that this was so, but he was not.

A soft hand touched his arm and he turned to look into the shy, doubtful face of Iva Wilson.

"You are here all by yourself?" she said. Then she asked suddenly, her dark eyes searching his face, "What is worrying you?"

"Nothing, really," Hammond answered. "I just don't like this place and these people."

"Nor do I," Iva said, shivering slightly. "I wish we had never come here."

He put his arm around her shoulders and she nestled against him. But there was still doubt and speculation in her face as she looked up at him.

"Kirk, will you do something if I ask you?" she said finally.

"Sure, Iva—what is it?"

"Will you kiss me?" she asked unexpectedly.

Hammond was startled. Then, a little doubtfully, he put his arms around her. Her face pressed his almost fiercely, her lips warm and quivering. But when she drew away there was a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"I thought so and now I am sure of it," she said. "You are in love with Thayn Marden."

"For heaven's sake, are you going to start that again?" he began impatiently. "I explained to your father and the others that it wasn't so, that—"

"You could convince them, Kirk," Iva said steadily. "For they are men. But you cannot deceive me, any more than Thayn herself could conceal from me that she loves you."

"Thayn in love with me? You're surely mad, Iva! She hates me, despises me—"

"She loves you, I am certain of it," Iva told him. "I watched her, in the ship. And it must be a very great love indeed that can make her forget that she is a Vraman and you a Hooman."

Kirk Hammond felt overwhelmed, stunned. And out of his mental chaos rushed the conviction, the certainty. He had fought it down, all along. He had crowded it into his subconscious where only the mechanical brain-reader and Iva's keen eyes had been able to see it. He had deceived even himself by constant reiterations.

But it was the truth. He had loved Thayn Marden from the first moment he had seen her. He knew it now and would know it while he lived. Iva seemed to read his catastrophic self-revelation in his face. She shook her head sadly.

"I am sorry for you, Kirk. For even though you and Thayn love each other, I am sure that no Vraman will ever marry a Hooman. No Vraman has ever married anyone in all our history."

Kirk Hammond looked at her with drawn, unhappy face.

"Iva, I wish that things had turned out differently."

SHE ignored that.

"Kirk, listen. My father and Gurth would call me traitor for saying this, but it is true. I do not love the Vramen but I fear far more these strange, unhuman people called the Third Men.

"I think that Thayn may have really warned truthfully of danger when she warned against these folk. The Vramen, though they have monopolized immortality and have arrogated the direction of our civilization to themselves, have never really oppressed us Hoomen. I would rather trust them than these cold-eyed, unhuman strangers."

"That's the way I've felt from the first!" Hammond burst out. "Iva, I've got to find Thayn and learn the truth about all this from her!"

"I fear that you will never see her again, if she remains in the hands of these Third Men who so hate her people," Iva said.

Hammond's brain raced.

"She's somewhere down in the back of this building. I've got to know where we stand before the Third Men question her tomorrow. I'm going to try secretly to find her tonight!"

He started toward the door of the room. Iva clung a moment to his arm.

"Be careful, Kirk. I feel there is terrible peril here."

Hammond could see none of the Third Men in the corridor so he started out. But at once, one of the machine-servants rolled around a corner of the passage and confronted him with its staring lens.

"What are you wishes?" the thing asked tonelessly. "If you desire to go anywhere, I will summon one of the masters."

Kirk Hammond turned and went back into the room he had just left.

"We're practically prisoners," he told Iva

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tautly. "They have those machine-servants on guard outside."

Iva looked more worried.

"Then these Third Men do not really trust us at all."

"And that makes me more determined to find Thayn before this thing goes further!" Hammond exclaimed. "The door is blocked, but—"

He went to the window. The city Vonn now slumbered darkly beneath a night sky of incredible splendor. The heavens were crowded with a glory of flaming suns such as Hammond had never before beheld. Here, at the heart of the great star-cluster, the night of the world Althar was of a magnificence unmatched elsewhere in the universe.

Under that supernal glory of crowded stars the great building that was the heart of the Third Men's city seemed quiet. He could see only a few of the Third Men moving about the nearby courts in which the plastic fliers were kept.

"I'm going down the wall," Hammond said quickly. "Help me fix a rope, Iva."

They tore strips from the cover of the pad on the cot. These were soon twisted together into a rude, serviceable rope. Hammond thrust his energy-pistol deeper into his belt, then clambered over the sill of the window. Iva leaned down, face pale in the star-glow. He slid down to the ground, then crouched in the shadow. And then, his hand on his weapon, he crept along the shadow of the wall.

Hammond perceived a door in the wall. It opened and admitted him into a softly lit passage. He was in the rear part of the ground floor of the building. Somewhere in the maze of rooms back here, Thayn was held.

"But where? How in the world can I find her?"

It began to appear impossible for him to do so without being discovered. There were some of the Third Men moving in nearby rooms and halls. Hammond realized discovery was inevitable. And he had an idea that it might mean instant death. He spent a quarter-hour, frantically trying one corridor after another, darting hastily back on two occasions when he heard Third Men approaching. His deepest dread was of meeting one of the machine-servants.

He had worked his way back still further into the building when a door opened and three of the tall Third Men came down the passage. Hammond flattened himself back quickly into a cross-corridor. To his relief, the three men passed by.

HE HEARD their voices and with sudden excitement recognized one of them as Mar Kann.

"—make your report at once to Holl Gormon," Mar Kann was saying as they passed. "It is of the highest importance that we—"

Kirk Hammond, crouching with his energy-pistol in his hand, stiffened. Had Mar Kann come from Thayn's prison? It sounded as though it might be so. He decided to investigate and slipped down the hall to the door whence they had come. He could hear no sound from within. Cautiously, he opened the door and peered inside.

The room was a lighted laboratory. But the mechanisms and instruments around it were alien and unfamiliar to Kirk Hammond's eyes. Thayn Marden sat fettered in a high, strange chair, looking toward him. There were no other people in the room.

"Thayn!" he exclaimed, starting forward. Her eyes opened and then incredulity and hope showed in her pale, lovely face.

"Kirk, look out!" she cried.

One of the machine-servants was rolling forward from a corner of the room! He had overlooked it in his swift glance, thinking it merely another of the laboratory's mechanisms. The mindless thing, its lens turned toward him, spoke raspingly.

"No intruders are allowed in the Psychological Department tonight, under Mar Kann's order. Retire at once."

The machine, as it spoke, raised a jointed arm that held a lethal-looking cylinder pointed straight at Hammond. Hammond tried to temporize. Surely a man could outwit a mere mechanical thing?

"Mar Kann sent me," he declared, edging a little nearer.

The rasping voice retorted instantly.

"You will retire at once, for you are not Mar Kann nor one of the Psychos."

Hammond turned as though to obey, then whirled with the energy-pistol in his hand upraised. He dared not fire, lest the crashing blast arouse all the building. He tried to knock the weapon from the machine-servant's grasp. The cylindrical weapon was bolted to the jointed arm! He discovered that in dismay as his futile blow rebounded.

"Get on top of it, Kirk!" cried Thayn in warning. Hammond had leaped to avoid the

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swing of that armed "hand" toward him. He had seized the jointed arm but could not hold it.

Desperately, he heeded the Vraman girl's cry and leaped up on top of the machine-servant's square box. Crouching on it, he hammered furiously with the muzzle of his weapon at its lens-eye. The pistol-barrel smashed through the lens as the machine rolled under him with universal-jointed arms reaching up to seize him. Then suddenly the arms stopped, and the whole machine froze motionless.

"You have broken it," Thayn cried. "But the two Psychos who were here will soon be back"

Hammond, quivering from the weirdness of that fight, scrambled off the lifeless thing and went toward her. Her wide blue eyes looked up at him, her white face seeming strange and drawn.

"Why did you come, Kirk?"

"I couldn't leave you here in the hands of your enemies," he choked. "Thayn, I love you —I know now I always have from the first."

Heartbreak showed in the depths of her eyes. Her voice was an aching whisper.

"Kirk, I love you too, but—"

He waited for no more. He kissed her, ignoring the peril that brooded about them. Her lips answered his with an almost desperate passion. And then her head drew back.

"It is hopeless! We Vramen cannot love anyone. I thought that I never would, I thought I had forgotten all such emotions until you came."

"Why is it hopeless, Thayn?" he demanded passionately. "If we love each other, what can separate us?"

"A gulf wider than space and deeper than time," she said, her eyes wet with tears.

"But it is not time to think of ourselves!" she exclaimed, "Kirk, your coming to Althar has precipitated an awful danger, to my people and to all the galaxy."

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply, his own premonitions returning with redoubled force.

"Kirk, the Third Men plan conquest not only of Althar but of the whole galaxy! They can achieve it, for their science is far more powerful than anything we Vramen have.

"Until now, we Vramen have always thwarted them by preventing their seizing our ships and metal in our city Sharanna. It was the Barrier the Fourth Men gave us that stopped them. But now they have read from my mind the nature of the Barrier and will be able to overcome it!"

CHAPTER XVI

Dread Revelation

WILD thoughts flashed through Hammond's brain. He felt a sharp dismay.

"You mean, they've already searched your mind? But Holl Gormon said they wouldn't until tomorrow."

"Holl Gormon is only playing with you Hoomen, using you as tools. He'll never let your race become immortal. He despises you as lower than animals."

That confirmed Kirk Hammond's own impression. Yet still he hesitated, doubting.

"You might be only trying to convince me of this to save your own people, keep your own domination of the galaxy."

Thayn Marden's eyes became agonized in their appeal.

"Kirk, you must believe that I tell you truth! We Vramen have never been tyrants or oppressors to the Hoomen of the galaxy. We have sought only to use our longer lives and greater knowledge to lead them along safe paths.

"But the Third Men are different. If they conquer the galaxy they will institute a cold, scientific government in which Hoomen and Vramen will be merely so many domestic animals. They will make all the galaxy an unhuman, efficient machine like this city!"

Kirk Hammond felt a chill horror at that vision, which matched so truly his own forebodings.

Yet still he hesitated.

"I let you trick me once before into letting you escape, Thayn. If this is another trick—"

Thayn leaned forward, her lips met his.

"Kirk, I love you, you must believe that. I would not trick you now. I seek only to save Vramen and Hoomen alike from awful disaster."

He made up his mind.

"Thayn, I may be a triple fool but I believe you. I'm going to help you escape to warn your people."

Hope sprang into Thayn's eyes.

"If we could get to Sharanna with warning, the disaster might still somehow be averted."

Kirk Hammond's mind was still dazed by the whirl of events but he concentrated on

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immediate problems.

"Those manacles that hold you to the chair—how are we to get them off?"

"You will have to burn them off with your energy-pistol," Thayn said quickly. "Set the power-stud on its side to the lowest notch and put the muzzle against the fetters behind the chair."

Hammond obeyed. He triggered and the tiny, crackling spurt of energy seared through first one tough plastic fetter, then the other. Thayn sprang to her feet.

"We must have a flier, to get out of Vonn. If we can get to the court where they are kept—"

Hammond hung back a moment. "Thayn, what will happen to Wilson and Iva and my friends? I can't leave them in danger."

"They are in no danger yet," the Vraman girl insisted. "Holl Gormon plans to use them as tools to help conquer Sharanna and later the outside galaxy. The Third Men will merely think you a traitor who helped me escape, for that is what Lund and the others will say."

"And it may be true," Hammond said doubtfully. "No, I don't mean that! I have no more doubts of you, Thayn."

He went with her to the door and slid it open. Mar Kann and the two other Third Men, the Psychos, were coming down the corridor.

Mar Kann stopped, startled. Then with superhuman speed of reaction he whipped out a cylindrical weapon. Thayn had acted a moment sooner. She had snatched the pencil-shaped "shocker" from Kirk Hammond's belt and leveled it. The pale beam of paralyzing electric force hit the Third Men and dropped them in a heap just as one opened his lips to cry out.

"There's no time to lose now, for they'll soon be found!" exclaimed the Vraman girl.

"This way—I came through a door that leads out into the courts," Hammond told her swiftly. They reached the door and emerged into the shadow at the base of the building.

THE supernal sky of flaming stars that tented the city Vonn cast its brilliant glow down upon the paved courts. They could see the court in which the plastic fliers rested. Thayn and Hammond slipped along the dividing walls and through the gate toward those parked machines.

"I think I can operate one of the fliers," the girl was whispering. "I observed closely the method of operation when we were brought here. They appear to be propelled by use of magnetic currents."

Hammond had faith in her more-than-human scientific abilities, yet still it seemed to him a desperate gamble. They breathed in relief when they saw that there were no Third Men in the court. Behind them the stark black mass of the great building hung black and silent against the glorious stars. They had reached one of the fliers and Thayn was already climbing lithely into its cabin when a rasping, hatefully toneless voice broke upon them.

"State your identity and authorization," it demanded.

One of the machine-servants had rolled silently up to them and confronted them with a level cylinder. Hammond realized instantly that there was no chance of overcoming this mechanism as he had the one in the laboratory.

"State identity or you will be destroyed," rasped the thing.

Its jointed arm moved slightly. It was going to fire its weapon. Hammond ducked as the cylinder buzzed. There was no burst of fire or energy or sound from it, but the body of the flier behind him suddenly crumpled as though under a terrific blow.

Hammond triggered his energy-pistol desperately. The crashing blast of fire from the gun smacked into the machine-servant and tore it into a wreck of fused plastic. But cries of alarm rose nearby.

"That's done it!" Hammond cried to the Vraman girl. "No chance of getting away silently now!"

He found her leaping unhurt out of the wrecked flier. She ran with him toward the next vehicle. Hammond glimpsed machine-servants rolling swiftly across the court and Third Men bursting from doors in the great building.

"I have it!" Thayn cried from the control panel. There was a whistling sound and the flier screeched up into the night.

It rushed headlong, rocking and dipping, across the black roofs of Vonn. Then it was beyond the city, hurtling at rising speed over the dark land beneath the flaring sky of stars.

"They will follow quickly!" Thayn called over her shoulder. "Look back!"

Kirk Hammond glanced swiftly behind them and his heart sank. Shining specks

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were rising from Vonn in the star-glow, and rushing on their track. As minutes passed their flier attained a speed that made the walls of the cabin hot with friction. They were flying low over the great moss-forests in a northeastward direction. But the fliers of the Third Men seemed remorselessly to shorten the distance between them, though they were still far behind.

"They know the operation of these fliers better than I do and will overtake us long before we can reach Sharanna," Thayn told him.

She tried changing course, veering sharply in one or another direction to confuse their pursuers. But always, the shining specks reappeared behind them, each time a little closer.

"As I feared, they have locator equipment which automatically finds our position for them," she murmured. "We shall have to risk a desperate expedient or both of us will be destroyed very quickly."

Hammond did not understand.

"What do you plan to do?"

She was peering tensely ahead.

"Black Lake should not be far from here. If we can make the Third Men think we've perished—"

The starlit forest of great moss-clumps continued to unreel beneath them with appalling speed. Then far ahead a dark glint of starlit water broke the vista of the weird forest.

"That's Black Lake!" Thayn exclaimed. "Take my hand and prepare to jump when I do! Open the cabin door."

IT SEEMED suicidal to Kirk Hammond, but he felt that he had no other alternative. Thayn suddenly slowed the flier down to a mere fraction of its former velocity. They were almost brushing the tops of the moss-clumps in this slowed flight.

"Now!" she cried, and threw herself out of the cabin door with him.

Hammond expected a violent shock when they hit the ground, but they did not hit it. Instead, he and Thayn plunged from the flier into a huge, soft, yielding mass. It was one of the great moss-clumps. Thayn had accurately estimated the exact moment of jumping so as to land in one of them.

As they rolled in the big, soft mass, the empty flier was speeding onward, out over the dark waters of the lake.

An instant later, the pursuing fliers of the Third men rocketed by overhead. At their far greater speed, they almost at once overtook the unoccupied machine out over the lake. There was no sound or sight of weapons being used. But the empty flier suddenly was smashed into a wreck of broken plastic that plummeted down and disappeared with a splash into the dark water.

"They will think we were still in it," Thayn whispered, crouching down with Hammond in the moss. "Unless they have suspected!"

"Those weapons they use have titanic power," she added thoughtfully, "I think that they too make use of magnetic force."

The Third Men's fliers circled for some minutes over the spot where the wreckage had sunk. Then, as though satisfied that none had survived the wreck, they turned and raced back southward toward Vonn.

"We have escaped them," Thayn said with relief. Then, in the star-glaw, he saw her face fall. "But we are still very far from Sharanna and have no means of travel but on foot."

He helped her climb down from the huge clump of moss. When they reached the ground, Thayn started without hesitation in a northeasterly direction.

"We must skirt the lake and then strike straight north for the mountains," she said. "Sharanna is high in their peaks."

It was weird, walking through the star-lit moss-forests of Althar. The canopy of brilliant suns overhead struck shafts of glowing silver light down through the great clumps, and there were deep shadows. Black Lake lapped and sucked gently along the shore they followed. There were still no signs of animals or birds.

The speed with which Thayn Marden hurried was proof of the desperate urgency she felt.

"We are many hours' travel from Sharanna. And time is short before the fate of Althar and the galaxy will be decided."

"Surely it will take the Third Men a long time to prepare an attack on your Vramen city?" Hammond asked.

"They have been prepared for such an attack for ages!" Thayn exclaimed. "All that held them from it was the Barrier they could not pass. For the Barrier is a machine given us by the Fourth Men, which throws a shield of vibration all around our whole city Sharanna.

"That vibration is exactly tuned to the brain structure of the Third Men. We

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Vramen can pass it, as you Hoomen could, but the vibration is so adjusted to the neuronic pattern of the Third Men's brains that it literally shakes their brains into madness if they enter it.

"But now they have learned much about the machine from me. Not about its inmost principles—I cannot understand the strange science of the Fourth Men—but enough clues about its operation so that they can devise protection from it. Even now, Holl Gormon will have his scientists working on such protection, and once they have it they'll go out into the galaxy!"

Kirk Hammond again felt the ghastly impact of that vision of the cold-eyed ruthless Third Men fastening tyranny on the galaxy.

"Thayn, who are the Third Men and where did they come from? What is the secret of all these strange, warring human races on Althar?"

Thayn Marden's white face was tragic in the star-glow as she answered him.

"The Third Men are the chldren of my people—the children of the Vramen!"

CHAPTER XVII

In the Sky City

KIRK HAMMOND was so stunned by the unbelievable assertion that he stopped and stared blankly at the girl. Thayn spoke swiftly, trying to convince him yet seeming at the same time to tell the thing reluctantly.

"It is true! That is why they have their name. The Hoomen are the First Men, the first human species. We Vramen are the Second Men. These people are the Third Men, and there is a fourth human species, too.

"It began four thousand years ago when a few Hooman scientists, exploring this cluster, came first to this Star of Life and its world. They landed here on Althar, and the unique hard radiation of the Star so affected every cell in their bodies as to make them immortal. They were thus the first Vramen.

"At first those first Vramen saw no drawback to their immortality. They brought some other Hoomen here to Althar so that they also could become immortal. They built Sharanna in the northern mountains and planned to change the whole Hooman race into Vramen in time.

"But then came the dreadful revelation. Children began to be born to those first Vramen in Sharanna. And the children were not like either the Hoomen or the Vramen. They were a totally new human species, large in stature, twelve-fingered, colossal in mental power—the Third Men!

"Then the Vramen realized that this world of immortality was a dreadful baited trap. The radiation of the Star of Life gave immortality, yes. But also it affected the chromosomes, the cells of heredity, in the human bodies it made immortal. It caused an evolutionary mutation in the human stock!

"It might have been forseen had not elation over immortality prevented. Hard radiation has always had the power so to shift the genes in the chromosome cells as to cause sudden evolutionary mutations. That was what had happened to the Vramen.

"The Vramen at first clung to hope that these children of theirs, this new human species they had fathered, would prove godlike and admirable. But as the Third Men grew up that hope faded. They were too alien a species.

"The too-sudden burst of evolutionary change had given them vast mental and physical development at the expense of spiritual development. The Third Men wished to seize the whole galaxy, establish themselves as utterly unchallenged rulers and treat Vramen and Hoomen alike as inferior species of no great intelligence.

"The Vramen refused this ghastly plan. And when the Third Men, who were still only half-grown, tried to use force their parents succeeded in repelling their attempt. So all the Third Men, totally devoid of anything like filial emotion, left Sharanna and established the new city Vonn. There, when they reached maturity, their scientific powers grew greatly as the centuries of their immortal lives passed.

"They would have come back then and conquered their parents had they not been upset by a strange new turn of events. The mature Third Men in their new city Vonn had intermarried and children had been born to them. The same power of the rays that had caused the first mutation now caused another. The children of the Third Men were not like their parents at all. They were still another new species—the Fourth Men!

"These Fourth Men were totally different

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from the Third Men. Their brain-cases were huger than in any humans so far. But their bodies were disparate. They were over-specialized in regard to mind and had no capacity or inclination for any life of action. They desired only a life of thought.

"Their progenitors, the Third Men, had deliberately planned to let this new species be born so that they could utilize its greater mental powers for their own purposes. But the Fourth Men, hating action and ambition, would not let themselves be so used.

"They repeated history by deserting their parents and going off to found a strange, underground city on the other side of this planet. There they have dwelt ever since, engaged in the pure thought-research which is their purpose in life."

Kirk Hammond was stunned by this epic history of mutations running wild with the human stock in this world of immortality.

"And did the Fourth Men then produce still another human mutation?" he asked.

"No, for the Fourth Men are sterile. They are the end-products of human evolution in this world. But since, like us and the Third Men they are immortal, they have lived on ever since."

"But they seem to have intervened to help you protect the Vramen from Holl Gormon's people," Hammond said wonderingly.

THAYN nodded.

"That was because the Fourth Men hate war and turmoil to rage on Althar. To prevent it they gave us the Barrier so that the Third Men would not be able to attack us.

"I think our only real hope now is to get the Fourth Men to help us again with their wondrous science before the Third Men attack. But I feel worried that they may not do so, for they so despise action that they may not wish to become embroiled at all."

"And this is the story that you Vramen didn't want the Hoomen in the galaxy ever to know?" cried Kirk Hammond.

Thayn nodded somberly.

"We didn't want it known for we felt that the Hoomen would look on us as monstrous freaks if they knew of the mutation and would completely reject our leadership."

"Thayn, you're crazy!" Hammond said forcefully. "It's only some inferiority complex born of your change that has made you Vramen think that. I'm certain the Hoomen wouldn't feel so."

Thayn stopped and looked at him, her white face earnest in the brilliant star-glow.

"Do you feel so toward me now that you know what different species I belong to, Kirk Hammond?"

"Of course not!" he exclaimed and took her in his arms. "Thayn, I love you and all that makes no difference."

She broke from his grasp, sobbing.

"You refuse to understand. No Vraman can marry. That is because the children of Vramen would only be Third Men. That is why we forswear love and marriage when we accept immortality.

"I made that vow of renunciation, four hundred years ago when I was a youthful scientist. And I knew what it entailed. The Vramen who invited me to become one of their caste made all clear to me.

"They told me, 'You will live loveless and lonely all your life, and your life will be unthinkable centuries long. Your only reward will be consciousness that you are serving the whole of humanity.' And I agreed, and came to Althar with them and became immortal under the Star of Life.

"I thought I had forgotten love completely until that night on Earth in the Hoomen's refuge. There, when I pretended love to trick you into letting me go, I suddenly found that the trick was on myself and that I really loved you."

"Then nothing is going to part us. We can work out this problem somehow," Kirk Hammond told her determinedly.

Thayn shook her head.

"There is no solution. We belong to different species and that is a gulf wider than space and deeper than time, as I told you."

But as they started forward again through the moss-forest, he reached out and took her hand.

"Don't think of it now, Thayn. There must be some way out for us."

"It is only day-dreaming to think so," she said, a catch in her voice. "But day-dreaming can be sweet."

Her slim fingers tightened on his.

"The strangeness of it! You from old Earth in the forgotten past, I from the Vramen since four hundred years ago, walking here under Althar's stars like lovers!"

For hours they traveled northward through the moss-forests. At last the glorious sky of stars began to pale. In the east an opalescent

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glory shot over the horizon. Scintillating with all its uncanny splendor, the Star of Life rose to cast its brillance over Althar.

A little later they reached the end of the forest. Before them, grassy higher ground sloped up into the rocky foothills of sky-storming blue peaks. High in those peaks brooded a weird, deep rosy glow.

"That glow, far up there, is the Barrier, and inside it lies Sharanna," Thayn told him. "We had better rest before we go on."

Hammond sensed that she needed the rest far less than he, for he was aware of the Vramen's inexhaustible strength and resilience. Looking at her blond hair and clear profile as they sat in the shadow of a moss-clump, Kirk Hammond could not reconcile himself to the thought that she was not human in the usual sense.

ALL the hours they had walked, his bewildered mind had struggled with that problem. And always, as now, he came back to the firm resolve that no difference would separate him from her.

"Thayn, I've been thinking," he said suddenly. "If I were to take off the ray-proof garment beneath my clothes, the rays of the star would make me—like you. We could always be together then."

Horror showed in Thayn's eyes.

"No, Kirk! You must never do that! For though you would become one of the Vramen, we still could never marry. And you would be condemned to the endless, barren monotony of immortality that has been my lot."

Her hands gripped his shoulders in appeal.

"You do not know how terrible it can be to live on in loveless, lonely life for century after century, seeing ordinary humans grow up and marry and father children and then die and rest, while you never change! I will not let you share that fate!"

Hammond was shaken.

"It seems that you Vramen have made a terrible sacrifice for the rest of humanity, and one that has not been appreciated."

She shook her head.

"The Hoomen simply do not understand. They resent us for not letting them become immortal. And we can't tell them the truth, for if we did, they would reject us as human freaks."

"I still think you are wrong about that," Kirk Hammond told her. "Anyway, we'll talk about it again."

He had reached a determination that, even if all else were denied him, he would at least share Thayn's fate. They started again, climbing the rugged foothills and then toiling up the steep and rocky slopes of the enormous mountains.

By mid-afternoon they were still far from the lofty plateau above on which the Vramen had built their city. The day was waning by the time they reached the edge of the Barrier. In the gathering dusk the rosy glow brooded for many miles over the peaks. Thayn led him straight into that strange roseate aura.

"I can't feel anything at all," Hammond said wonderingly.

"As I told you, the vibration of the Barrier is tuned to affect only the brains of the Third Men," she answered. "Because they are a different species from us Vramen or Hoomen, the neuronic structure of their brains is radically different from that of ours.

"If you were a Third Man the vibration would at this moment be setting off a shrieking madness in your brain. But because you are a Hooman it does not harm you in the least."

Hammond was near exhaustion and his heart sank as he looked up through the eery glow toward the heights, still above them.

"We've miles to go yet and it will soon be night. It'll take us many hours yet."

Thayn shook her head.

"No, Kirk. The Barrier automatically gives alarm in Sharanna when anyone enters it. My people will investigate."

Only a few minutes after she spoke there rushed down the roseate glow the slim shapes of four Vraman fliers. They landed on the slope close by. Armed Vramen, shining, handsome men, pouring out of the craft.

"Thayn Marden!" exclaimed one. "We feared you lost in space when you failed to arrive in Sharanna after your telaudio message." Then, stiffening, the speaker exclaimed. "Who is this Hooman?"

"No time for explanations here!" Thayn said swiftly. "I bring news of danger. We must see the elders at once."

A few minutes later saw them in one of the fliers, rushing steeply up through the pulsing rosy radiance.

THEY soared up over the peaks. Kirk Hammond looked down and saw a small plateau upon which arose a city of wondrous beauty.

It was an elfin city of pure white streets

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and towers and domes, laced with flowering green gardens. The alabaster spires that rose like frozen music, the graceful, high-flung bridges that linked upper levels of many structures, the deep rosy glow that enveloped it—these gave an unreal, fairy beauty to Sharanna of the Vramen.

The fliers dived toward a central, circular white plaza. As they landed Hammond perceived that at the center of this space was the enigmatic object from which the rosy glow appeared to emanate. It was a big, dull-silver ball, thirty feet in diameter.

Thayn read his thoughts.

"Yes, that is the apparatus that emits the vibration of the Barrier. Even we know little of what is inside it, for the Fourth Men built it and brought it here."

Kirk Hammond was so drugged by weariness that, as he followed the girl into a towering building, he was hardly aware of the excited Vramen and women gathering about them. Inside the building, in a lofty white hall illuminated by shimmering light, two Vramen came to meet them. Both had the look of men past middle age, one a tall, spare man, the other stocky and bearded.

"These are the two leaders of our elders," Thayn said to him quickly. "They are the men who first found the Star of Life, long ago—Smith Rymer and Bror Gormon."

The tall, thin Vraman named Rymer glanced swiftly at Kirk Hammond and then turned a stern glance on the girl.

"You bring a Hooman here to Sharanna? What is the meaning of this, Thayn?"

"Danger, the most terrible that has ever threatened us!" Thayn Marden exclaimed. "Danger from the Third Men!"

She talked swiftly, and as they heard her rapid explanations, the faces of Rymer and Gormon grew grave.

"The peril is great indeed," muttered Smith Rymer. "The scientists of the Third Men have great powers. With the clues gained from your mind they'll surely soon be able to devise a counter to the Barrier. And once they do, they'll sweep down through it onto Sharanna!"

His thin face set in decision.

"There is but one possible hope of repelling that attack when it comes. We must ask the aid of the Fourth Men."

Bror Gormon gestured toward Hammond.

"What of the Hooman?"

Rymer's eyes rested on him a moment.

"He did great wrong to help the others come to Althar. But he redeemed that by aiding Thayn to escape and bring us warning. We will accept him."

"Come with me," he added urgently. "We must not lose a moment in informing the Fourth Men of the peril."

Hammond and Thayn followed the two elders across the shimmering hall and downstairs to a massive locked dooor. Smith Rymer produced a tiny tube which he pressed against the lock of the door. A bead of light winked and the lock clicked open. The room inside was small. The only object in it was an apparatus that looked much like an ordinary telaudio set.

"When the Fourth Men gave us the Barrier for protection," Rymer explained, "they left us this apparatus by which we might call them if the Barrier ever failed. I only hope that they will answer."

AS RYMER seated himself in front of the screen of the apparatus and touched its switches Hammond looked wonderingly at Bror Gormon.

"You two were among the first to find the Star of Life, Thayn says? But that first discovery was four thousand years ago!"

The stocky, bearded Gormon nodded.

"We have lived ever since. We are the oldest of the Vramen."

Hammond shook his head.

"It seems incredible. And it seems strange too that your name is the same as that of the Third Men's director."

The Vraman's bearded face grew somber.

"That is not strange. For Holl Gormon, the leader of the Third Men, is my own son."

Only then did Kirk Hammond remember that the Third Men were the children of the first Vramen. In Bror Gormon's somber face he read the deep tragedy that had resulted from the appalling mutations of humanity on this world.

Rymer uttered a little exclamation.

"At last I've reached them!"

On the screen of the telaudio a scene had appeared. Kirk knew that it was a scene in the legendary underground city of the Fourth Men on the other side of the planet.

It was a huge, square, subterranean chamber with burnished silver walls, pallidly illuminated by a sourceless glow. At its center was a colossal mass of interlinked wiring, tubes, recorders and other unfamiliar apparatus of incredible complexity.

Corridors branched from that room in all

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directions like the spokes of a wheel. Along the corridors were many small, cell-like rooms, each closed by a transparent door. In each cell, as though in coma, sat a single figure.

"Those are the Fourth Men," murmured Smith Rymer. "They engage in tremendous projects of joint thought-research, by somehow correlating their minds through that big mass of apparatus you see."

Kirk Hammond stared unbelievingly into the screen, at the creatures he could glimpse sitting unmoving in those little cells. The Fourth Men! The final, awesome mutation of men who had evolved too fast and too far!

CHAPTER XVIII

Battle and Death

NOW, Kirk Hammond felt mixed emotions. These creatures who were the end-product of human evolution on Althar were both glorious and pitiful. They were no more than three feet high. Their bodies were the pitifully thin, frail bodies of undernourished children.

But their heads were enormous, bobbing on their thin necks as though too heavy for them. Bald, with enormous, bulging craniums, the great luminous eyes and tiny nose and baby-like mouths gave them weirdness.

One of the Fourth Men came into view, walking toward the screen. He peered at them with an expression of irritation.

"What is the meaning of this untimely call?" he demanded in a piping voice. "You have interrupted our thought-research at a most delicate point. We are extrapolating the past history of the cosmos beyond the pre-nebular period, and this is a serious disturbance of our work."

"We would not have called if it had not been urgent, Awlo Kal," said Rymer quickly. "There is imminent danger of terrible conflict."

Awlo Kal, the Fourth Man, listened impatiently but his expresssion changed slightly when he heard Smith Rymer's swift story.

"This is most upsetting," he declared. "The Third Men will upset all Althar with their ignorant, childish desire for physical conquest!"

"They'll surely soon find a way to get through the Barrier," Rymer said. "Can't you help us somehow to repel them?"

Kirk Hammond added hopefully, "Surely with your science, you Fourth Men can devise a way to destroy them when they come?"

"Destroy them?" repeated Awlo Kal incredulously. "What kind of primitive, savage person is that who suggests that we destroy the Third Men? We would not dream of killing them or any other living thing.

"All that is necessary is to remove the desire for conquest from the minds of the Third Men. That could be done, I think, by rearranging the synaptic patterns of their brains so as to introduce schizophrenic doubts of themselves into their minds."

It sounded hopelessly far-fetched to Kirk Hammond. But the Vramen appeared to take the suggestion with complete seriousness.

"You will prepare a weapon for that purpose at once? The Third Men's scientists will surely solve the Barrier in a few days," said Smith Rymer anxiously.

"Yes, yes, we will prepare the simple apparatus necessary for the purpose and bring it to Sharanna in time, never fear," was the reply of Awlo Kal. "It will not take long for a few of us to accomplish that."

And without any word of farewell, the Fourth Man switched off his own telaudio and the screen went dark. Hammond looked anxiously at the Vramen.

"They can't deal with the Third Men by psychological weapons when the whole galaxy is in danger!"

"The psychological science of the Fourth Men is very great and they can do what they say," Rymer assured. He added anxiously, "I only hope that they will do it in time!"

Kirk Hammond shook his head.

"It will surely take them a long time to prepare such a subtle weapon. And also it will take them time to get here with it if their city's on the other side of Althar."

"The Fourth Men can come almost instantaneously, when they're ready," Thayn Marden told him. "They have a method of transposing space by rotating sections of it around an axis in another dimension."

But Smith Rymer still looked grave.

"The only danger is that they will be so engrossed in their endless thought-research that they will forget about it."

His thin face hardened in decision.

"We'll make ready every weapon of our own that we can. And also we'll set an atomic

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fuse to our supplies of copper here. In the last extremity we'll destroy Sharanna and all in it rather than let the Third Men carry conquest out into the galaxy."

Kirk Hammond found himself reeling with fatigue as they returned to the upper level of the building. Thayn insisted upon his sleeping. He tried to resist, but when he fell upon a couch in the upper chamber to which she led him, he sank immediately into exhausted slumber.

He awoke with a sensation that many hours had passed. When he opened his eyes he saw through the window opposite his couch that the sky was darkening to night again. Hammond turned his head, and found that Thayn Marden was sitting by his couch and watching his face with a strange intentness.

"You have slept long," she said softly. "For hours my people have been busy and they are still preparing weapons."

SHE rose as Hammond walked over to her. Her brilliant blue eyes looked up at him yearningly as he put his arms around her.

"No, Kirk—"

But her lips clung to his when he kissed her, a heartbeat of time that he would never forget.

"Thayn! Thayn!" he whispered.

Sudden sirens, shrieking the scream of a lost soul, echoed through the city and tore them apart.

"That is the alarm!" Thayn cried, face white. "But there can be no attack so soon?"

They raced down to the lower floor of the big building. Smith Rymer and Bror Gormon were there and Rymer was speaking rapidly to a gathering group of taut-faced Vramen.

"Our radiolocators show a great fleet of fliers approaching from the south! It can only be the Third Men coming:"

"But they *can't* have devised a counter to the Barrier as soon as this!" Thayn cried. "Even their scientists could not do that."

"It seems so to me and it may only be feint but we cannot take chances," Rymer replied. "Every man and women to his defensive position!"

Sharanna was in uproar when Thayn and Kirk Hammond emerged into the central plaza. Under the rosy glow of the Barrier men and women were running to the big energy-guns that had been mounted at strategic locations during the day.

"I am going to call Awlo Kal," Rymer said tensely. "This may only be a feint but we cannot be sure."

Hammond grew taut in every nerve with awareness that the Third Men with their stupendous weapons were rushing ever closer through the night. The plaza now was almost deserted, the Vramen speeding to their defensive posts around it and in the city beyond.

"I must go too, Kirk!" Thayn said quickly. "You stay with the elders—"

"I stay with you," he flashed. "Now and in the future."

She grasped his arm.

"Then come!"

They started across the plaza. And then an incredible event exploded upon them. Down through the rosy glow of the Barrier swept six black plastic fliers—craft of the Third Men! Thayn Marden cried out incredulously as those grim black shapes swooped down:

"They have come through the Barrier! But how—"

Things happened with split-second speed. The fliers had flashed to a landing in the plaza. From them emerged men armed with big energy-guns, who ran toward the big silver sphere of the Barrier machine.

But they were not Third Men, the members of this sudden raiding party. They were Hoomen. Hammond suddenly recognized their faces.

"Jon Wilson and Lund and the others!" he yelled. "So that's the way the Third Men are striking!"

He saw it all in a flash. Hoomen could pass the Barrier without harm. The Third Men would have read that fact from Thayn's mind. So they were sending in Wilson and his band to destroy the Barrier mechanism and open the way for Holl Gormon and his hordes.

"Wilson, wait!" cried Hammond, running forward. "Don't destroy that machine! You don't know what you're doing—the Third Men are tricking you!"

Some of the Hoomen swung around, startled. Among them was big Rab Quobba.

"It's Hammond!" cried the Vegan. "Boys, we'd better wait until he tells us—"

But Gurth Lund interrupted, his energy-gun leveled at Kirk Hammond, his face raging and deadly.

"I knew he was a traitor and his being here with the Vramen proves it!"

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LUND fired as he spoke, the thin, crackling bolt of fiery energy darting at Hammond. Thayn, at that same instant, plunged to knock Hammond out of the blast's path. Then she reeled as the crackling bolt of fire struck her body.

"Destroy the Barrier machine!" Jon Wilson's voice was yelling. The Vramen are coming!"

Kirk Hammond, as he got to his feet, saw streams of fire from the weapons of Wilson and others tear into the great silver sphere. The big sphere cracked, split and fused. Abruptly the deep rosy glow that brooded over the city vanished like a turned-off light. From the frantic Vramen running out onto the plaza came a hoarse, hopeless yell.

"The Barrier is down!"

Kirk Hammond was bending wildly over Thayn. A deep wound in her white side gaped black and scorched.

"Thayn!" he cried huskily. "You shouldn't have done it!"

Her eyes were closed, her face white. Behind him energy-guns were crackling as the Vramen poured in around Wilson's band, but he paid no attention.

A wild voice shouted in Hammond's ear and he turned to look dazedly into Iva Wilson's bloodless face.

"Kirk, I tried to tell them not to carry out the Third Men's plan!" she was sobbing. "I even insisted on coming with them, hoping to persuade them—"

Her voice trailed off as she saw Thayn Marden's face.

"Is she dead?"

"No, and she'll live—she's got to live!" Kirk exclaimed hoarsely.

The scuffle of battle behind him had ended. He turned to find that the Vramen had overpowered the Hoomen raiders. Wilson's band had surrendered to the overpowering odds.

"You can kill us, but it'll do you no good now!" Jon Wilson flared. "The Third Men are coming!"

"You fool, you've brought disaster not only on the Vramen but also on your own people and all the galaxy!" thundered Bror Gormon.

"Hold them in the tower yonder," he ordered. "And tell them what they have done, so they may know the bitter truth before we all perish!"

A Vraman came running to him.

"The fliers of the Third Men are coming down on us now!" He pointed up into the southern starry sky.

"Every man to the defense!" shouted Bror Gormon. "We may have no hope but if we die the Third Men will go with us."

"I'll take care of Thayn, Kirk," Iva exclaimed to Kirk Hammond. "They are coming!"

Hundred of fliers were sweeping down out of the blazing star-decked heavens. Already energy-guns throughout the city were savagely blasting up at them with leaping tongues of fire.

But the Third Men landed their fliers along the widest street, and poured forth in a solid mass. They carried their cylindrical magnetic weapons. Bolts of invisible, terrible force smashed paths of death through the Vramen defenders who crowded to meet the attack.

Kirk Hammond, rage and anguish in his soul, was in the forefront of those defenders. His energy-pistol spat fire as men on either side of him were smitten to rags by the unseen bolts of force.

This defense could not last long. The magnetic weapons of the Third Men were too stupendous in power and range. And the Fourth Men had not come in time. The end would be the atomic explosion to destroy everything. Under the brilliant star-glow, Sharanna was in the death-throes. Hammond saw Holl Gormon's cold face back in the mass of the attackers and heard his shout.

"Sweep them out of the way and get to the underground cooper-stores, at once!"

He knew that Holl Gormon had accurately forseen the desperate final stratagem that the Vramen would adopt. He shot in fierce effort to destroy the man, knowing that he was himself teetering on the brink of eternity.

"Behind us!" suddenly screamed one of the Third Men. "Look—"

Kirk Hammond saw the same incredible spectacle that had brought that screech of startled fear.

IN THE street beyond the mass of attackers, there had suddenly appeared as though by sheer magic a square metal platform on which were a dozen small human figures and a big, multi-muzzled apparatus.

"The Fourth Men!" yelled a hundred voices among the invaders.

It was they, Hammond saw. It was Awlo Kal and a half-score of his comrades, who

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had come in answer to Rymer's call—had come with the suddenness of thought, by that strange method of space transposition that annihilated all distance! And now they were turning their apparatus or weapon upon the mass of the Third Men.

A fine violet spray of light like a powerful electric brush shot out from the multiple muzzles of their apparatus and swept back and forth over the mass of Holl Gormon's followers.

Hammond still could not believe in that strange-looking weapon. Stop this ravening army of attackers simply by altering their minds and sapping the foundations of their desire of conquest? Win this titanic struggle merely by inducing artificial schizophrenia?

"Destroy them before they overpower us!" Holl Gormon was shouting furiously. "They are human. They can be killed!"

But the Third Men had stopped fighting, were looking at each other confusedly, then staring around them in sudden timidity. That timidity rushed into panic! The Third Men began to drop their weapons, to stumble back to their fliers. And their leader was among them as the fine violet spray swept over him also. Within a brief interval every one of the attackers had fled out of Sharanna in panic haste.

Smith Rymer stood beside Hammond, his face quivering.

"They will never come back. Those schizophrenic fissions caused in their brains' synaptic patterns will forever keep them too timid, too doubtful of their own abilities to seek conquest."

Awlo Kal, the little Fourth Man on the platform, nodded his huge head.

"That is so. There will be permanent peace now on Althar. And we will no longer be interrupted in our researches, we hope."

The Fourth Man made a signal. The platform abruptly vanished as the space-transposition method was again employed.

"Then we've saved Sharanna and our people and all the Hoomen outside!" breathed Bror Gormon. "And—and I did not have to kill my son!"

Hammond clutched at Smith Rymer's arm. "What of Thayn?"

Rymer shook his head sadly.

"She is dying."

"Can't your science somehow save her?" he cried.

"Not even an immortal body can survive such an injury. She would have been dead already had she been a Hooman."

Kirk Hammond went numbly with them to the tower of the elders where Thayn had been taken. Jon Wilson and the other Hoomen met him inside it. Wilson's gaunt face was trembling with emotion.

"The Vramen told us the whole story, Hammond. We know now why they wouldn't give us immortality. But no Hooman would want it at that dreadful price!"

"Thank heaven I so suspected the full effect of the rays that I prevailed on Wilson and the others to keep their rayproof body-shields on until we were more sure," old Thol Orr put in.

"But why didn't the Vramen tell us before?" cried Wilson. "Then we wouldn't have resented their immortality or hated them."

Thayn Marden spoke in a whisper from the couch on which she lay.

"Then you don't think us unhuman mutational freaks, now that you know the truth about us?"

Wilson answered her chokingly.

"We think you men and women have sacrificed everything to lead and help our civilization. And all Hoomen will think so when they know the truth."

"If that is so," said Smith Rymer with deep emotion, "then the old hostility between Hoomen and Vramen has ended now forever."

"It is as you said, Kirk," whispered Thayn incredulously. "We should have told them long ago."

KIRK HAMMOND felt blinding tears in his eyes as he bent over her and gathered her shattered body in his arms.

Her voice was a faint murmur in his ear.

"Don't grieve. Rest will be sweet to me. And we could never have had a future together. But—but I am glad that one night at least, we walked like lovers in the starlight—"

Her whisper choked and faded and he knew that the life had gone out of her.

* * * * *

Later, standing outside and looking with blind, unseeing eyes across the silent white city at the dawn, Kirk Hammond heard Lund and Quobba slowly approach him. Gurth Lund's face was white and working as he extended an energy-pistol hilt fore-

(Concluded on page 113)

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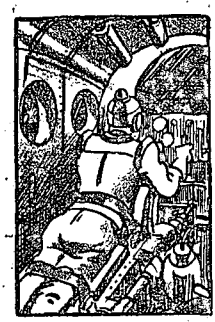
Venus Mines, Incorporated

By NATHAN SCHACHNER and ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

When radioactive deposits are discovered on Venus, space war is imminent, but a veteran of the outer air lanes is courageous enough to pit himself against alien forces!

CHAPTER I

Journey Into Chaos



"HELLO, hello, hello—Chris, do you hear me?—hello, hello, *hello!*" Arnim Penger slammed down the tele-talker and turned to his companion. "No answer yet."

"It's queer, all right, Mr. Penger. But what's there to worry about? We got Mr. Bell's message that he was back from his exploratory trip hours ago. And there's nothing could happen to him at the post, is there? He wasn't to start trading until tomorrow, so he must have had his Curtain charged and no Venusians in the enclosure. Besides, they're a pretty harmless lot, anyway."

The veteran trader shrugged his broad shoulders. "Nothing much could happen to him, I suppose. But this is the first time communication has failed." He fell silent. But there was a brooding light in his steel-gray eyes, and a tense grimness about his fine bronzed features.

He stared unseeingly at the great pile of clotted spider web that filled half the trading room of the little post. A cool half million that accumulated result of half an earth year's dickering with the natives was worth. And all it had cost Venus Mines, Inc. were some bushels of brightly colored beads and glittering gew-gaws dear to the savage heart.

"There's a Mitco post about some miles the other side of Bell's post," he mused aloud.

Britt Haldane turned from his contemplation of the grey bleached jungle, the dense, light-shot ceiling, the sheeted torrents of the typical Venusian landscape.

"I say, you don't think there's any chance of trouble from the Martians?"

Penger shot a quick glance at the fresh-colored youngster with the starry blue eyes, and the tow hair that persisted in falling over his forehead. This eighteen-year-old lad brought back memories of the time, two decades past, when he himself was taking over his first station, on Jupiter.

Those were unregenerate days, with the Board of Planetary Control yet unborn, and life made zestful by the continuous guerilla warfare with the forces of Mitco, the great Martian Interstellar Trading Company, the Earth company's only rival.

"No, not much chance," he drawled, in reply to the lad's question. "They'd hardly challenge the B. P. C.'s wrath. And yet, if the stakes were great enough. . . ." He sighed, unaccountably. "I suppose I'm just fed up on these eternal rains. I'll be glad enought to get back to Earth when the relief ship comes, and leave you here."

Britt's face lit up.

EDITOR'S NOTE

SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Venus Mines, Incorporated," by Nathan Schachner and Arthur Leo Zagat, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!

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A HALL OF FAME NOVELET

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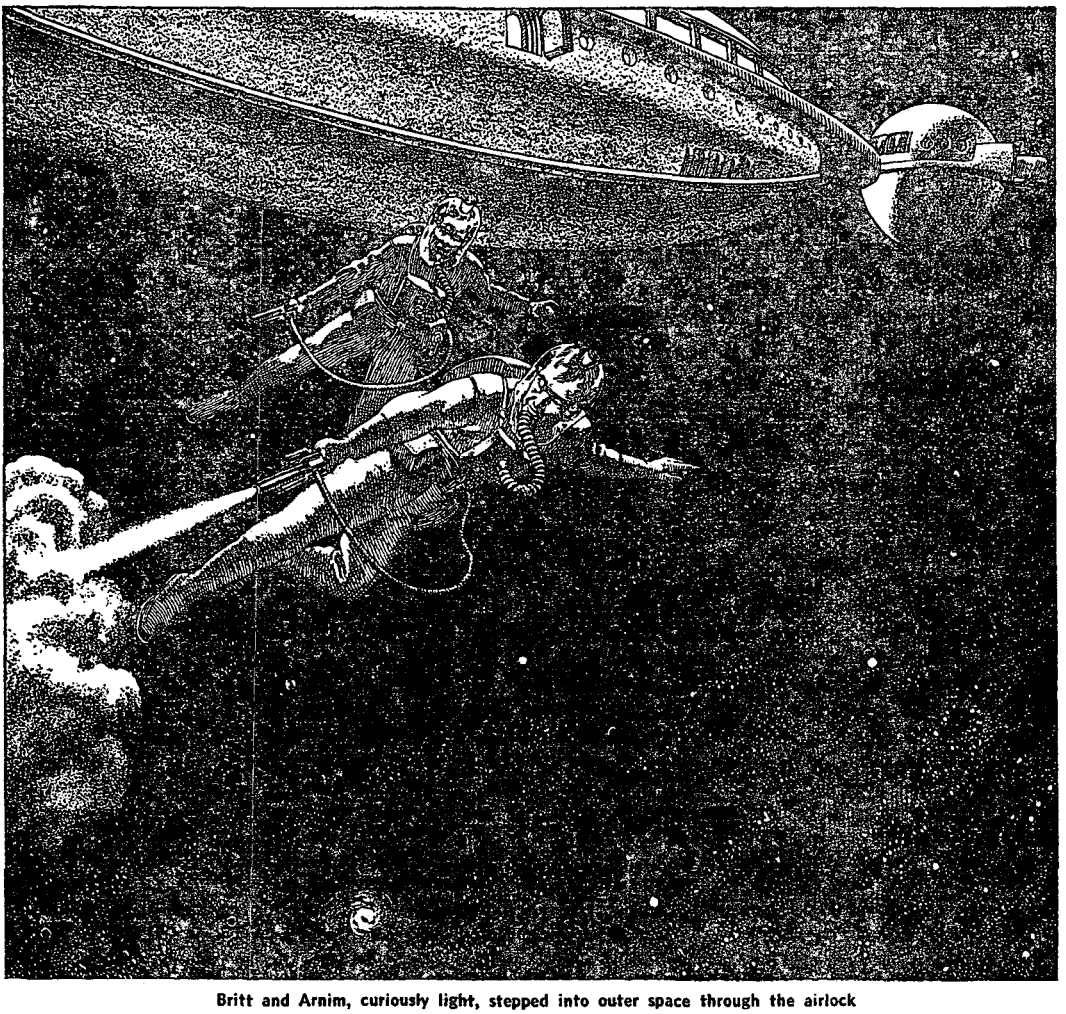

Britt and Arnim, curiously light, stepped into outer space through the airlock

"Gosh, I can hardly wait to take over. To be a real Venus trader at last, in charge of my own station." He saw the older man's amused smile and added hastily. "Of course, it isn't that I want to see you go, but—you know how is it."

Arnim nodded.

"Yes, I know how it is. I felt the same way when I took over my first asignment. It sure was a kick. Two days later I was crouched behind a barricade of ice blocks, taking pot shots at a bunch of Martians who were doing their darnedest to exterminate me and a couple of other Earthmen, and grab off the richest jovium mine on Jupiter for Mitco.

"There were no Interplanetary Filing Laws then, no taking a bunch of papers over to the office on Ganymede and thereafter being protected by the Mercurian patrol ships with their zeta-ray projectors.

"You took what you could get and held it by the power of your own guns."

The youth's eyes glowed.

"It must have been great! Wish I'd been in the game then!"

"You weren't born then, young fellow." Penger's eyes wandered past the lad to the teeming landscape revealed by the open door.

"Hello, I don't like that coppery tinge to the clouds down on the horizon. Looks as if we're going to have a taste of one of the electrical storms old Venus favors us with once in a blue moon.

"Get out in one of those, and you'll be ready to give up darn quick. Even the natives scurry to their caves when one of the big ones is on a rampage."

His eyes narrowed as he gazed out. The dripping jungle pressed its greyness close up against the interlacing net of copper filaments that was the Curtain, the apparently frail barrier around the liquid mud clearing of this outpost of Earth's commerce.

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FROM the low ceiling of dun clouds poured a torrent of warm rain that might dwindle to a drizzle or increase to a devastating downpour, but which never for a moments ceased. Far away, the clouds were suffused with a reddish, ominous glare.

"Come on," he said at last, as he sealed the door. "Work's over for another twelve hours. Start the drying machine, and we'll get comfortable. Then I'll try to get Chris again. If he hadn't borrowed the Wanderer for that trip of his I'd be tempted to hop over and find out what's up."

Haldane obediently swung over the lever of the artificial atmosphere machine that reproduced Earth condition for the traders during the rest-periods. As the air dried, the two stripped off the sodden working suits. Britt stretched himself luxuriously as the moisture was sucked from the bronzed skin of his body.

"This is a little bit of all right. Let it storm for all I care."

Penger looked estimatingly at the young fellow. Was he going to stand the gaff, he wondered, alone with the treacherous natives, and the eternal rains, and the horrible loneliness? The loneliness—that was it. Would this fresh-faced, eager youth break under the strain of the long months with no one of his own kind to talk to, to look at? Well, Chris Bell would be only a few miles away. That reminded him, he still hadn't got through to old Chris. He turned the transmitter.

But as he did so there was a crash, and the neon lights went out. Their cold white light was replaced by a blinding blue glare as the outer world was illumined by a tremendous lightning flash. Then it was pitch dark, as over the muttering rumble of the diminishing growl and the pound of the torrential rain on the roof, came the high whining signal of the field receiver.

Arnim sprang to the instrument. Unerringly his fingers sought and found the switch and thrust it home. Out of the blackness a voice sounded, a precise, clipped English voice, yet strained and urgent, shot through with pain and exhaustion.

"Penger, Arnim Penger, are you there? Penger, Penger, help, Penger!"

Arnim snatched up the transmitter.

"Chris, Chris. I'm listening. It's Arnim Penger. What's the matter? Quick, man! What's happened to you?"

The far-off, disembodied voice seemed to be dying out.

"Arnim. Thank God—you answered at last. It's hours. Help—*help* he-e-lp!" It died out to a whisper, then, abruptly, it was gone.

"Chris, what's the matter? What happened?" The trader was shouting into the transmitter, but only the rattle of the raindrops, and a crash of thunder, answered.

The lights came on. Haldane was standing just behind him, white-faced. Penger gazed at him, unseeing, his eyes steely flames, his great fists clenched.

"Britt," he snapped, "take over!" He went out in the anteroom, struggled into a fresh suit of corduroys, pulled on his banta waterproof.

As his face appeared out of the black folds it was set, grim.

"If you don't hear from me by the time the relief ship gets here, have 'em send a force over to Bell's post. No trading. Heaven knows what the Venusians are up to." He was strapping on the high mud-shoes.

Britt came out of his daze in a tumbling rush. He fairly stuttered in his eagerness.

"I say, you can't do that—I mean you can't go alone. I'll go with you—otherwise—good Lord, you know what I mean." He fell into a sudden silence, but his eyes pleaded for him.

Penger shot one glance at him.

"You'll do," he said laconically. "Hop into your clothes."

Haldane blushed with pleasure at the veteran's endorsement even as he dived hastily into his clothing. Arnim stood in the doorway, waiting impatiently. The younger man snapped the elastic of his respirator-mask over his head, settled his hood down over the goggled eyepieces.

"I'm ready, sir." The mouthpiece of the mask muffled his tones strangely.

They were outside, in a world gone mad. From black clouds that seemed not fifty feet over their heads, forked lightning shot incessantly, shot and stabbed at them as if the elements themselves had risen in wrath to oust these beings from an alien world. To the continuous roll of thunder was added the crash of the nearly solid sheets of water that beat down upon the Earthmen, strangling them despite their masks, striving to drive them into the viscid mud that oozed fluid beneath their wide-spreading mud-shoes.

In the flickering blue light beyond the Curtain, the tall ferns were flattened down over the tangle of writhing vines and lush wire-grass till the thicket seemed a solid mass, compressed by the weight of tons of water, lashed by a wind of hurricane force.

Haldane gasped, and paled. Even Penger, veteran though he was, hesitated for an instant. It was the height of insanity to dare the long journey in this chaos. No one could live through it. But then he remembered that call, coming eerily out of the darkness.

"Help, Penger, help!

Chris Bell was in trouble, needed him!

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Chris, who had fought at his side on Jupiter, a score of years ago. He hunched his shoulders, thrust his massive head before him, and bored into the wind that was a solid wall. He'd get to Chris despite all!

BRITT was lifted from his feet by the wind, thrown against the heavier form of his companion. Arnim shouted something. The lad could see his lips moving, but could hear nothing above the tornado's roar. A dripping arm gestured to the door of the little building they had just quitted. Penger wanted him to go back, thought this storm would lick him. It was dry there, dry and safe.

It would be so easy to let the wind blow him back. In all this time they had struggled only fifteen feet. After all, this was his post, the station he would be in charge of as soon as the relief ship picked Penger up. No one could blame him for staying behind—for obeying orders.

But—he was a "Venus, Inc." man, one of the stalwart company that was conquering the far planets for Earth. And another "Venus, Inc." man had called for help, off there in the storm-lashed jungle. He shook his head, thrust away the hand that was pushing him back.

Again Pengler's hand sought his shoulder, but only to squeeze it in token of approval. They slogged into the storm again.

At last they were through the Curtain. Arnim turned, took something from the voluminous pocket of his waterproof. A tiny radio-transmitter, low-powered, sending only a long dash that varied completely in wave length for a half minute. The key to the Curtain—Penger pressed the button. A corruscation of tiny flashes snapped through the wind-tossed filaments. The power was on—that apparently frail barrier hummed now with the Grendon vibration.

Britt could see the driven rain rebound from the invisible wall. Nothing, no human body, no Venusian dart, not even a high-powered electro-bullet could pass through the net. The station was safe, protected against all intrusion until the machines that produced the vibration were stilled by another pressure on the little instrument with its secret combination of frequencies.

Into the jungle they went crawling now, through chance-found gaps in the matted chaos of the cyclone-pounded vegetation. The black quagmire sucked at their feet, clinging lianas twisted around them, clung tenaciously. Thorns ripped at them. A bolt of lightning struck, not a score of feet away, and sent a towering twisted fern into flaring destruction.

The Venusians, fish-scaled and web-footed though they were, dared not prowl abroad. The very beasts—strange amphibious creatures of a steamy, primitive world—cowered in their lairs or dug themselves deep beneath the sheltering mud of the jungle tarns.

But the Earthlings pressed forward, deafened, gasping, half-drowned, wholly exhausted. A yard, a foot, an inch at a time. Crawling, scrambling, twisting, dragging themselves through the terrific storm to answer a comrade's cry for help. Slogging into the hurricane for hour after hour of interminable, inhuman struggle.

Two mud covered figures reeled out from the edge of the jungle, dazed, bewildered, dizzy with exhaustion. Just ahead hung the filaments of Bell's Curtain, intact. They were through! Through the jungle and the storm the daring adventurers had reached their goal. How long it had taken them, by what devious route they had come, they never knew.

Sometime during that endless journey the electrical storm had ended, but they had never noticed it, so stunned had they been with the turmoil of the elements. Behind them the drenched and cowering jungle was straightening. The drab cloud ceiling was shot through with light. The rain had diminished to a tenuous drizzle. Fine weather—on Venus.

Ahead, within the circling Curtain, was a sea of mud. A torpedo-shaped, two-man flier glistened in the filtering light, half-hidden behind a squat, rough hut, whose door hung open. What lay behind that door?

CHAPTER II

Through the Curtain

PENGER, his banta waterproof hanging in shreds, moved forward wearily. As he came into the open, a hiss ripped the stillness, a red streak flashed past his hooded and masked head. The trader whirled, threw himself headlong to the ground.

"Down! *Down,* quick!" he shouted to the startled Britt. The youth dropped.

"What the—"

"Shut up." Arnim's whisper was urgent. "Lie still."

The lad twisted his head. His companion's projector was in his outstretched hand, his keen eyes were darting from point to point of the thicket. Fatigue seemed forgotten. Where his waterproof had been torn away by some thorn, the cords of his neck stretched tensely.

"What's up?" he breathed.

"See that, out in the mud."

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A tiny dart, scarlet-feathered, lay there—a Venusian poison dart. A little shiver thrilled the youth. He had seen a huge three-horned ratlos, ten feet high at the shoulder, brought down to instant death by one of those, sent with unerring skill from the blow-pipe of a native hunter.

"Came near finishing me. They're—*wah!*" The angry spat of Pesger's weapon interrupted. An acrid smell of burned flesh stung Haldane's nostrils. "Got him!"

"Where? Who?"

"To the right. See, behind that S-shaped liana."

The lad stared. At first he could see nothing, then a tiny patch of silver appeared, just beyond the arm-thick vine Arnim had indicated. The youth started to rise, but Penger's steely clutch stopped him.

"Down, you fool! There may be others. Stay here, till I call. And don't move, if you want to see Earth again."

The motionless youngster watched Penger slide through the mud—so slowly that Britt looked twice to make sure he had moved at all. He disappeared beneath a clumb of brown fungi, umbrella-shaped. His black hood appeared above the toadstools, his shoulders glistening black with the dampness. Haldane clenched his fists, nervously. What an awful chance he was taking. Suppose there were other unseen hunters watching for just this chance?

"All right, lad, come along." Penger's call seemed to come from the ground, off to one side! Then—who was standing there? Was it Bell? The novice rose, ran forward, crouching, to where the other had suddenly appeared, without his banta cloak.

As Haldane reached his companion, the mystery of the seeming newcomer was solved. Penger was pulling his waterproof from a withered fern-frond that was supporting it. He smiled grimly at the white-faced youth's ejaculation.

"Thought I was asking for a dart, did you? Just slipped this coat off, stuck it up and squirmed away. If there had been more of the natives around I'd have known it darn quick—maybe got a chance to take another clip at one. Let's see what this bird I brought down looks like."

Britt shuddered as he stared down at the prostrate savage. In spite of the low-browed, primitive face, noseless and with gills where the ears ought to be, in spite of the naked savage's fish-scaled skin and webbed feet, the youth could not help but feel him human.

Only a few hours ago others of his kind, perhaps this very individual, had been chaffering with him at the trading post. And now he lay there, unmoving, a great gaping hole in his chest, black-charred at the edges. Those electro-bullets did terrible execution when their high-powered radite charge was released on impact.

"Come on, Britt. He's dead to stay. Let's get in to Chris."

Penger had his little combination set in his hand, had pressed the switch button. The hum of the generator from the hut in the center of the compound ceased. The two dived through the dangling filaments, and Arnim flashed on the protecting vibration again—just in time.

At the jungle edge another Venusian had appeared, panting. His dart whirred from the hollow reed he raised to his mouth, fell back impotently from the Curtain.

"Nothing wrong there," gasped Britt.

They had clumped wearily through the viscid mud, were at the hut's entrance.

"Chris!" Arnim called, "Chris! We're here!" Then there was a choking gasp. "Darn them, oh darn them!" It was a sob, and a prayer for vengeance.

There, on the wet, green-slimed floor, lay Chris Bell. His tall thin form was contorted in agony. The sharp features were clammy white, the little black mustache blacker yet by contrast. The transmitter of his tele-talker was clutched tight in his right hand, the sleeve ripped away, showed a livid red burn on the white arm.

His right foot was bare, the trouser cut away. The leg was swollen to twice, three times its natural size up to where, buried in the blackened flesh, a twisted leather thong cut in—horribly. On the floor a red-feathered dart, its tip bloodstained, told its mute story.

"Chris, old man, wake up. We're here. Chris! He isn't dead. He can't be gone!" Penger's hand was within Bell's shirt. A faint flutter, almost imperceptible, beat against the probing finger tips.

"Whiskey! Britt—there must be some around. Find it quick!"

HALDANE shot a quick glance around the little room. On a shelf he saw a familiarly shaped container, the purple B. P. C. seal unbroken. He twisted off the sealing cap. Penger had the bottle-neck between Bell's teeth. A little rivulet dribbled out at the corners of Chris' mouth, then he swallowed, convulsively. The eyelids flickered. A grimace of pain distorted his face. A groan, then his eyes opened.

"Arnim!" His voice was a shadow. The words were being forced out by sheer will power. "Never mind me—done for. Papers in flier—must be filed—at once. Letter too—explains. *Go!*"

"Chris, old boy, what happened to you?

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How did they get you?"

The dying man motioned to the bottle. Penger administered another dose of the stimulant. A little color came into Bell's cheeks.

"Why don't we do something for him, Mr. Penger?" burst from Britt.

"Nothing we can do," was Penger's hopeless response. "Once that dart-poison gets into you it's only a question of time before you kick off. Only thing that's kept him alive so far is the thong he's tied around his leg. But the poison's seeping back in spite of it—can't you see how black his skin is above the tied part? Soon it will reach his heart."

Chris was talking again, his voice a little stronger, with the false strength lent it by the whiskey. He was answering Arnim's last question.

"Came through the Curtain."

"Through the Curtain! How in hades—"

"Yes. Through the Curtain. It was charged, I'm sure of that." Bell's voice was blurred with agony, low, but very clear. An inner strength seemed to be supporting him, to be warding off the hovering death.

"It was charged, but just as I was going over to the Wanderer to take off, there was a whine from the jungle, a whine that rose and fell, and a shower of darts. Most struck against the Curtain, and fell, but some got through, and one clipped me, hung in my leg." A glance of astonishment passed between Penger and Haldane, but they did not interrupt the wounded man's laboring narrative.

"I dragged myself in here, strapped the leg. Knew it was no use, but I had to get a message through to you. I called and called, while that whine rose and fell, rose and fell out there somewhere, and the savages showed themselves around the Curtain and blew their darts through it. I watched them through the open door while I called you, and waited, dizzy, for the answer that never came.

"Just a little round spot, I noticed, in the Curtain where the darts came through. I kept shouting for you, till I passed out. Then I came to again, and called again. And that infernal whine still came from the jungle, and the fish-faced natives were dancing. And still you didn't answer.

"Then everything went black again. Don't know whether I dreamed or not, but it seemed I came to, and the noise from the jungle was louder, and through a haze I thought I saw a Venusian creep up to the Curtain, and start through. Coming through the Curtain, though I could hear my generator going full force! Then, when his body was halfway through he seemed to shrivel up and drop, with an awful look of agony on his face.

"Again I passed out. Thunder, thunder and lightning roused me. Thank God, the whining sound had stopped. A last dart hit the very spot the others had come through, but fell back. I called again—hopelessly. I heard your answer. Then—blackness again. . . .

The last word trailed off into nothingness. The white eyelids drooped, but came open again. Bell struggled into a sitting position.

"Don't, don't let them beat us, Arnim. They—never licked us yet. Do you hear me—old man—it's getting—dark. Where—where are you?"

"Right here, Chris, right here beside you. What is it you want me to do?"

"The Wanderer—the papers are there—and a letter—for you. Oh—oh—the pain," his hand clutched at his heart, his eyes stared unseeingly before him. "Arnim—Britt—get that claim filed. Go! As you love old Earth—leave me and go!"

He fell back.

"Good-bye," he whispered. Then he quivered, and lay still. "Good-bye, pal." There was the suspicion of a sob in Penger's voice. Then he turned to the white-faced, shaken Haldane. The veteran's face was grim, his eyes like chilled steel.

"If you ever make half the man he was. . . ." He choked, left the sentence unfinished, strode across to the still open door, and stood there, staring out.

Britt bent to the motionless body, straightened it, threw over it a blanket from the neatly made bunk. A thick silence reigned in the room, broken only by the eternal swish, of the rain.

"Britt—come here!" Penger's voice cut startlingly through the quiet. Haldane leaped to the doorway. "Look!" A red, metallic sphere was rising from the jungle, a scant quarter-mile away, and disappearing in the haze. "That's Rutnom's station ship, or I'm a dog-faced Jovian!"

"Rutnom! That's the Mitco super on Venus, isn't it. What's he doing over here in 'Venus, Inc.' territory?"

"That's what I want to know. I've run up against him before, on Jupiter. A sneaking, dirty fighter. I'm going out there."

"But—the Venusians."

"Darn the Venusians. I want to know if he was at the bottom of this deviltry, why the Curtain failed. God help him if what I suspect is true!"

"Then I'm going with you!"

"You stay here!"

"Mr. Penger, I would never forgive myself if you got into trouble out there and I wasn't able to help. Please. . . ."

"Oh well, if you will be a fool. Listen—

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when we're through the Curtain, let me go ahead. Follow about fifty feet behind. Keep in what shelter you can, and protect my rear.

"For the love of Mike, don't fall asleep, and don't take your finger off the button on your projector. If they get me, try to get back. Understand!" Haldane nodded.

ONCE outside the protecting network, he crouched in the shelter of a gnarled root, and marvelled at the dexterity with which the veteran moved through the thicket, darting from cover to cover like a gliding shadow. When his time to proceed came Britt strove to imitate his leader, but by comparison with the other's silent passage he seemed to be crashing recklessly through the tangled underbrush.

Suddenly Arnim halted, bent low, was staring at something through the bleached foliage. Haldan obeyed the covert signal to halt. After long minutes, Penger gestured for him to come up.

"Look at that!" Penger pointed with his projector through the leafy screen. Britt strove to pierce the mist and the rain, could make out nothing in the haze. Then a vagrant breeze cleared away the obscuring fog. He was looking at a clearing, man-made. He could see the hacked stumps of the jungle growth, still raw.

In the center of the opening was a tangled mass of wires, coils, broken glass. The ground was blackened and scarred as if a lightning bolt had just struck. To one side, a depression in the mud, rapidly filling with water, showed where the Martian sphere had rested.

"That's where the whining noise came from. I half-thought Chris was delirious—but I see it now. That's why the Curtain failed—why we couldn't hear Bell. Some ray-projector like a searchlight—that neutralized the Grendon vibration where it impinged and also drowned the communication waves.

"Concentrated, it was powerful enough to open a passage for the darts, but when they diffused it to cover a space big enough for a man to get through it neutralized only partly. That's what killed the savage."

"How could the natives have invented anything like this?" ventured Britt.

"Natives, fooey! It's Rutnom, up to his old tricks. Using the savages to cover his own tracks, so that he could put on a bland smile of innocence when the B. P. C. police investigate. He pulled that before on Jupiter. But why? Why? There's plenty of web here for both of us."

"Mr. Bell said something about filing papers on the Wanderer—and a letter."

"Of course. I see it now. That was a jovium burn on his arm. And I thought he was raving, was dreaming himself back in the old days. Wait. The Satona, the Mitco relief ship, is due here in a week. We have no time to lose. Come on!"

The trader was off at a run, reckless of possible ambush. Britt followed, wondering, back into the compound.

"No time to bury him now. We'll be back," Penger shouted as he sealed shut the door of Bell's tomb. In moments the Earthmen were in the little two-man flier. Penger sprang to the control levers, a roaring blast stirred the mud beneath. Then the Wanderer had leaped free, was shooting through the cloud banks at terrific speed.

Britt was thrust to the floor by the tremendous force of acceleration. Arnim clung to the control levers, gasping. In the visor screen there was nothing but grey drifting wisps of vapor. Then came a sudden glorious burst of light—the *sun!*—the sun the Terrestrials had not seen for half an Earth year!

CHAPTER III

The Chase Through Space

THE Wanderer reached the limit of its normal speed, settled down to its steady pace of two hundred Earth miles a second. Released from the pressure of the acceleration, Britt felt a sudden lightness. Already they were far enough from Venus to be losing the effects of her gravity.

Penger switched on the coils that normalized this condition within the ship. He studied the banked gauge faces, with their serried rows of quivering needles, leafed rapidly through the chart book conveniently clamped beside the control levers. Then he made certain adjustments, and locked the levers.

"All set. She's on the automatic control now. Nothing to do about navigation until we get within a quarter-million miles of Ganymede. Now let's take a look at what's happening behind."

He twirled the wheel of the periscope. On the visor screen, against the blackness of space with its myriad golden twinkling points, the great ball of Venus stood out, a vast sphere of heaving vapors, glowing glorious in the light of the sun. The two men crowded close to the screen, searching for sign of a pursuer.

"The Martian isn't following. Wise boy, his small boat hasn't the speed of the Wanderer; we'd walk away from him."

"Here's the letter, sir, that Mr. Bell spoke about."

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A fleeting smile crossed Arnim's face.

"Oh, you want to know what it's all about, do you. Can't blame you. Hand it over."

Penger read aloud:

"Arnim: I'm writing this to drop down into your enclosure from the Wanderer before I make off for Ganymede. I've got great news for you, but I don't dare talk to you over the tele-talker, for fear the Martians will overhear.

"First, I owe you an apology. For the first time, I think, in the nearly twenty years we've fought together as 'Venus, Inc.' men, I've kept a secret from you. And that's because it wasn't my secret. Last time I was on Earth, Stromstein told me, in strictest confidence, that the jovium mines on Jupiter, both ours and Mitco's, were petering out. He didn't think they'd last another two years."

"No wonder!" Arnim exclaimed. Britt looked at him questioningly, but Penger resumed his reading.

"You know what that would mean, of course. So you can imagine how I felt when, on that mapping trip I took, I stumbled on a mountain of the peculiarly greenish rock that is characteristic of the jovium deposits on Jupiter.

"I immediately staked the claim, then worked back through the jungle to where, about twenty miles away, I had left the Wanderer. I had to get a badinite flash, you see, to take a sample in, according to the rules of the B. P. C. Mineral Claims Commission. The stuff was almost pure. I got a nasty burn on my arm when I brushed against it, too.

"On my way back after I got my sample, I ran into Astna, Rutnom's sidekick. He looked queerly at the flask, and the burn on my arm, but I thought fast and told him I was out collecting insects, and the flask was the only thing I could find to put them into. I think I fooled him, but I'm a little worried."

"Yeah, he fooled him!" Penger interrupted himself. "You can't put much over on those Martians."

"Nothing much more. I've got the Wanderer all set for a long trip, and as soon as I finish this I take off for Ganymede to file the claim. After that we can thumb our noses at Rutnom.

"You'll be back on Earth by the time I return. Lucky fellow. Give my regards to the bright lights. And tell the kid I'll get in touch with him as soon as I get back. Venus won't be such a lonely place when they start working the mine. So long. Chris."

"Just about what I figured,' Penger concluded, "when I saw what Rutnom had been up to. Let's take a look at the location papers."

"Here's the dispatch box, sir. But it's sealed."

"Sealed! Well I'll be darned." Penger looked disconsolately at the square box of argento-platinoid that Britt held out to him. "That's a tough note. Suppose we lose that somehow—only Bell knew where that deposit is, and he's gone."

EVEN captains of interplanetary trading ships are sometimes venal, and Mitco was ever willing to pay well for a glimpse of the reports and other dispatches that shuttle across the skies between the Earth Company's far flung stations and the great Central Headquarters at Denver.

Hence these dispatch boxes were devised. Once sealed, they could not be opened save by the intricate unsealing apparatus that existed only at Denver and, by virtue of the supreme power of the B. P. C., at such control points of the august body as the Mineral Claims Office on Ganymede Any attempt to get at the contents by force, released a chemical within that utterly destroyed everything enclosed.

"Well, we'll have to take good care we don't lose it," Arnim continued. "I see the badinite flask is here, with the sample. Good. Now what do you say we get some food into us?"

"I think that's a splendid idea. Mr. Bell certainly stocked the ship up well with food tablets. And the water tanks are all filled. Say, if it wasn't for thinking of him lying back there, this would be a lark. I never expected to be on my way to Jupiter."

"It's no junket, and don't kid yourself. I've never known Rutnom or any other Mitco man to give up without a scrap. They'll be after us, beyond a doubt. And we'll have our job cut out to beat them."

"I'm not worried Mr. Penger," Britt retorted confidently. "I know you'll win out."

"Say, Mr. Penger," the lad broke out after a silence, during which both had busied themselves with disposing of enormous doses of concentrated food, "why should Rutnom go to such lengths to jump our claim? After all, the governments have a monopoly of jovium. There's no question of anybody making any money out of it."

"Plenty of reason. If we don't get this claim filed, there won't be any Earthmen worrying about making money after a few years. You heard what Bell wrote about the mines on Jupiter petering out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well—you know what jovium is used for. It's the catalyst that made interplanetary voyaging practical. Oh, we had space ships before the deposits were found on Jupiter. But they had to carry such enormous vol-

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umes of fuel to get anywhere that there was neither space nor carrying capacity left for commercially practicable freight nor, what is more important, in the present instance, heavy armanment.

"All they were fit for was to carry two or three men on exploration trips. That was the case on Mars as well as on Earth. Their fuel differed somewhat, but the principle was the same.

"Mercury, it is true, had had solar energy motors for ages, but they refuse to divulge the secret.

"Their civilization is so far ahead of ours that they refuse to have anything to do with Terrestrials or Martians, whom they look down upon as we look down upon the savages of Jupiter and Venus. True, they keep the peace, but that is because they feel it an obligation placed on them because of their superiority.

"The discovery of jovium initiated the commercial exploitation of the far planets. It initiated also a race in spatial armament between Mars and Earth, that so far has been a dead heat."

Britt was listening attentively. He had, naturally, heard all this on the school-broadcasts, but listening to dry history, and hearing it told by a man who had seen the history in the making, had helped to make it, were different matters.

Besides, he thrilled at the thought, he was even now taking part in a new chapter of the stirring story.

"You have seen a little of the ruthless nature of the Martians. What do you think would happen to Earth if our jovium mines were exhausted and they still had a plentiful supply, such as Bell credits to this new deposit?"

"They'd drive Earth out of space."

"Yes, and probably attack us at home. So you see how vitally important it is for us to get that box and what it contains safely to Ganymede."

"Why were you in such a rush to get off? Once we were away from Venus, Rutnom couldn't give us any more trouble. You said yourself that his flier hasn't nearly the speed of the Wanderer."

"His ship hasn't, but the Satona is due in a week. It will take us twenty days to make the trip at our best rate. She can do it in ten. With her armament, we wouldn't stand the chance of a snowball on the Sun against her should she catch up with us. And she'll try, my boy, she'll try."

"We ought to make it with about forty-eight hours to spare, but those Mitco boats don't adhere to schedule very closely, and she might well reach Venus a day ahead of time. If she does, you'll see some fun.

DAY after day the Wanderer drove across the immensity of space. Day after day the Terrestrials watched the visor screens, took turns scanning the wide velvety blackness of the heavens through the electro-telescope. Only the glory of the widespread firmament met their weary glance. A week passed by, and still there was no sign of a pursuer. The Earthmen began to breathe more freely. A little more, and they would be beyond reach of the Martians.

Then, on the eighth day, Britt, at the telescope, suddenly exclaimed.

"Mr. Penger, what's this? A new star, or. . . ."

Penger sprang to the telescope. Glowing redly in the oblique rays of the sun was a new body, a star where no star should be. Even as he gazed it grew, took form of a tiny half-disk.

"It's the Satona all right. And just as I was beginning to think we'd get away with it. Look at her come! Here Britt, watch her while I try to get some more speed out of this scow."

Haldane clung, fascinated, to the eye-piece while Penger thought desperately of how he might avoid them. With his given energy his speed was sadly limited and the pointer of the speed indicator would not move above the 250 mark on its dials. It would be suicidal to use up energy in getting any more out of the Wanderer.

"Gosh, Mr. Penger, she's overhauling us hand over fist. She must be doing five hundred a second."

"She's Mitco's fastest. I've heard she made six-fifty on her test trip. Well, we'll dodge her as long as we can."

The Satona was clearly defined now on the large visor screen, a hemishpere glinting in the oblique rays of the sun. On and on sped the little Wanderer without rest across the void, its occupants thinking and thinking as if seeking to increase the speed of their craft by the very intensity of their wills. And on and on came the pursuer, bulking ever larger on the screen.

"Isn't there anything we can do to keep those papers from them?" Britt grated out once between clenched teeth.

"If worse comes to worst, I'll smash the box. That will destroy them, but it won't do much good—only delay matters. They'll search Venus till they find Bell's mine and make sure no Earthmen has a chance to run across it."

"But we can send out expeditions too."

"Yeah? Earth will never know, till it's too late. You don't think they'll leave us alive to tell the story. No. Our only chance is to get the box through to Ganymede. And I'm darned if—hold on, I've got a hunch. It

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might work."

Penger's eye had drifted mechanically to the ground glass chart across which a red dot was moving to indicate the Wanderer's position in the reaches of interstellar space. Blue disks showed the direction of Earth, the Sun, Venus, Jupiter, the other planets. But an inch ahead a band of tiny blue dots wandered across the map. They represented the Asteroids—small fragments of a blasted planet following their own orbit around the central Sun.

The veteran changed the field of the visor screen. The following Satona, Venus, the Sun swept out of sight. Directly ahead the periscope pointed. Golden in the tremendous distance, Jupiter beckoned. But here—not forty thousand miles ahead, was a light fleck, something catching the sunlight. Penger grunted.

"Get bearings on the Satona, Britt. How far behind is she?"

"Only a hundred and ten thousand miles. Relative speed about four hundred per second. She'll have us in five minutes."

"Here!" the other snapped. "Take the controls. Hold her on the mark I've set."

Britt sprang to obey. A question trembled on his lips, but Penger's peremptory tone, the grim set of his jaw, forbade. The Wanderer had veered from her course, was driving for the asteroid, revealed now as a blurred ball, ten miles in diameter, revolving at incredible speed. Arnim had snatched up the precious box, was in the nose of the ship, his hand on the handle of the bow porthole. The flier would miss the asteroid by scant miles. They were passing it.

"Turn her, man, turn her left! *Quick!*" Even as Britt twisted the dial to obey Arnim had the port open, was throwing the box out in the direction of the Wanderer's curving flight, was struggling to close the thick glass against the outrush of air. The flier curved in a great semicircle around the whirling midget planet, headed back toward the Satona, now right at hand. Penger was at the telescope.

CHAPTER IV

Caught!

A VOICE sounded in the chamber, a grating, metallic voice.

"Halt, Wanderer!"

Arnim's eye was glued to the telescope eyepiece. To Haldane's wonder he paid not the slightest attention to the challenge. The youth hesitated, then with a flush of anger reddening his face he sprang to the controls.

Some wild scheme of escape must have inspired him at he swung lever after lever, sending the little flier darting about in mad, erratic zig-zags. And still no sound came from Penger, save a muttered, "I think it's working!"

Again the voice sounded, coldly contemptuous, from the Wanderer's space-radio receiver.

"Do not resist, Earthman, it is useless. Rutnom speaking."

Britt's face was livid with fury. He shook his fist at the image that filled the visor screen, the great bulking image of the Martian spaceship a rusty red egg of metal with the intertwining symbols that spelled M. I. T. Co. in the Martian graphs.

Suddenly the Wanderer lurched, her darting rushes checked in midspace. A tremendous force had seized her, was drawing her irresistibly toward her enemy. The Earthship shook with the thunder of her rocket-tubes, the void about seethed with flaring gases.

But the power that could send her careening through space at twice a hundred miles a second was puny against the pull of the Martian's magnetic fields. Inexorably the little flier was drawn back, back, back, until at last she drifted against the metallic side of the Satona and clung there.

Now at last Penger was torn from the telescope that so queerly absorbed him.

"Cut it out, you fool!" he whispered urgently to Britt. "Let me handle this." Then, aloud, as the tube-exhausts dwindled and died, "Penger speaking. What do you want of us, Rutnom?"

"Ah, it's Penger I have to deal with!" There was satisfaction in the metallic tone. "You know what I want. The location map of the jovium mine Bell found. Deliver that, together with the sample flask, pledge me your word not to report this occurrence and you shall be permitted to return to Venus, unharmed."

Penger's response was cold and very calm. "Sorry, I haven't the chart."

"Don't trifle with me. You would not be making this hurried voyage toward Antka* had your comrade not delivered it to you. Come now, you must realize that you are helpless. And, you of all Earthmen should know it is dangerous to play with me."

"You know my reputation. I do not lie. I had the chart, it is true. But when I saw that I could not escape you, I threw the dispatch box that contained it from the bow port of my ship. It is beyond your reach."

*The Martian name for Jupiter. Though Rutnom was speaking in English he failed to translate this in his anger.

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"Beyond my reach! Why, Penger, you grow senile. I noted and wondered at your erratic maneuver. I noted what you did in our televisor. You threw the box into the gravitational field of the asteroid. Your box lies on it by now. The rock is very small, you planned to rid yourself of me and return for it. So you've rendered my task easy. We descend. After I have recovered the map, I shall deal further with you."

"He's outguessed me, Britt!" There was exasperation, despair in Penger's tone. But the staring youngster noted, and wondered at the smile that played around his tight-lipped mouth. A warning gesture stayed the question foreshadowed in the lad's eager eyes.

The Satona, with the Wanderer held tight against her sphere, had hung motionless in space during this interchange. Now the captured Terrestrials could see the blue flare from the tube exhausts of the Martian space-sphere and feel the vibration of their blast.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the coupled ships began to circle the whirling asteroid. Rapidly the speed of the artificial satellite increased till, to an observer far off in space, the course of the coupled fliers must have been a gray blurred circle, whose centre was the planetoid, itself a blur because of the tremendous rate at which it turned.

To Arnim and Britt, watching their viso-screen, the effect of the circling was otherwise. Across the black sky was drawn a dazzling white arc that was the sun. The stars were darting golden lines. But the little planet became distinct as their speed neared that of its rotation.

Now they could see it as a jagged mass of bare rock. It was not ball-shaped, for this was not a world that had been formed while molten, but a bit torn from some ancient planet in an unimaginable cataclysm. It was a great jagged boulder, roughly oblate, ten earthmiles through at its widest diameter, perhaps six miles at its narrowest.

RUTNOM spiralled lower as the speed increased. The asteroid covered the screen, a bare, rocky shelf split and rent by its birth throes.

"Hello, we're drifting backward!" Britt broke the silence.

Penger laughed shortly.

"Looks like it. But it's simply that we haven't quite reached the speed at which the Asteroid is turning."

At last the landing was made.

"Whoever is handling that boat is a pilot!" was Arnim's tribute to the jarless halt. Then his face grew suddenly grim. "Some rocket tubes are still on. Quick, lad, how are they inclined?"

"Straight up, sir!"

Penger nodded.

"Then he hasn't thought of it," he muttered, in tones scarcely audible to Britt. "Keep quiet and follow my lead. We'll lick these birds yet, with a bit of luck." He slid open the beryllium-steel shield that covered the glass sideports.

An airlock door in the side of the Satona had opened. Grotesque in their goggled, billowing spacesuits three Martians were coming down a swinging ladder. The weight of the Wanderer, still clamped against her shell, was holding the larger craft askew. Not great, this weight, it is true, for the gravity of the miniature world was exceedingly minute, but the Martian captain had evidently thought it not worth while to correct the canting by use of his power-exhausts.

Arnim and Britt watched the ten-foot-tall aliens stride across the short stretch of deck to the entrance back of their own vessel. Around the waist of each a studded belt was clamped, its excrescences showing where the individual gravity coils were inserted. Were it not for these the Martians would have been rising a hundred feet with each step, so small was the asteroid's attraction.

As their captors reached the Wanderer, Rutnom's voice sounded again.

"Open your airlock for my men, Earthlings, and admit them."

"And suppose I refuse?"

"Then we shall burn our way through, and it will be the worse for you. I warn you again, Penger, I am in no mood to be trifled with."

The veteran shrugged his shoulders, and swung over the switch that actuated the outer door of the lock. To Britt's astonishment, his left eye closed in an unmistakable wink as he did so. The veteran had some plan, some strategy. Haldane racked his brain in an effort to guess it, but could evolve nothing.

The giant invaders were within the ship. The Terrestrials' hands shot upward as they noted the squat infra-red heat guns clutched ready in their hands. From one of the Martians, apparently the leader, came a guttural sentence in his own language. The others advanced warily. In a trice Penger and Haldane had been seized, searched none too gently, their weapons extracted and their wrists bound with tough cords.

"Here, not so rough!" Britt had protested as his arms were twisted down behind his back. But his exclamation brought no response save a particularly vicious tightening of his bonds. Arnim was silent, though his eyes were glowing like live coals.

The two prisoners were thrust uncere-

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moniously against the wall of their vessel. The apparent leader remained at guard over them, the wicked snout of his weapon never moving from its threatening posture, while the two others commenced a hurried but thorough search of the cabin.

Every nook or cranny was invaded, the door of the food closet was ripped from its hinges, the plates of the flooring torn up as a heat gun melted its rivets. Even the metal walls of the vessel were scrutinized inch by inch for evidences of a concealed hiding place.

Suddenly there was a grunt from one of the Martians, signalizing his finding of the badinite sample flask.

At last, apparently satisfied that the location map was not on board, the chief of the Mitco men spoke aloud, in the curious concatenation of consonantal sounds that was the Martian language. From the speaker came a crisp rejoinder, then, in his precise English, Rutnom's admonition to the Earthlings.

"You will be brought to this ship, you two. Set your gravity pads at full Earth setting. The attraction of this world is negligible."

SILENTLY the "Venus, Inc." men permitted themselves to be invested in their space suits after having made the indicator adjustment on the padded attraction plates. Once again, Britt started to protest at the unnecessary harshness with which he was being handled.

However, he again caught a warning look on Penger's face.

As the little group crossed to the Satona, the empty sleeves of the Terrestrial's space suits stuck out queerly, straight before them, as if a high wind were blowing. Britt noted this and wondered. There could be no wind, for the asteroid was utterly devoid of atmosphere.

Then he forgot the matter and gave himself up utterly to the black mood of despair that flooded him.

Divested once more of their encumbering garments within the shelter of the Martian spacesphere's hull, Penger and Haldane stood at bay, facing the gigantic figure of Mitco's Venusian representative, and the bulking forms of a dozen others, ranged behind him. The Martians were counterparts of the Earthmen, save for their size and the curious greenish tint of their skins.

Even as he bravely met Rutnom's sneering stare, Britt was conscious of a strange lightness, a feeling of power that comported oddly with his situation. Then he realized that the gravity coils of the Satona were adjusted to Mars' conditions; that the weight, the internal pressure of every part of his body was one-third what it would be on Earth or Venus.

Rutnom was speaking, a threat in every syllable he uttered.

"Penger, I am growing tired of this. Tell me where that deposit lies."

Arnim returned the Martian's stare.

"If I knew, I wouldn't tell you, but luckily I know as much about it as you."

The green tinge of Rutnom's face deepened.

His tiny red eyes shot fire.

"You lie, Penger."

The veteran made no reply.

"I said you lie." Rutnom raised his gun, ominously. "I'll burn ever bit of skin from your body, inch by inch, till you tell me what I want to know."

Penger's gaze was level.

"Bell had no time to tell me before he died. And he had already sealed the chart in the dispatch box."

The eyes of the two ancient enemies met and clung. Veins stood out on Rutnom's forehead as he strove to read the Earthman's thought. But his gaze was the first to waver and fall.

"Very well. Since you are so stubborn, and I am in haste, I shall search for the box. It should not be hard to find on this bare terrain. But, mark you, if I fail I'll wring that location from you if I have to smash you into a quivering pulp."

IN STACCATO sentences the Martian issued swift orders to his men.

Fresh thongs were strapped about the Earthlings' ankles, and those about their wrists tightened.

All but one of the Martians slid into space suits.

Then the great hull emptied, and Britt and Arnim were left alone, with one huge guard watching their prone bodies. One guard, but his eyes never wavered from them, as they lay sprawled on the floor where they had been thrown, and the terrible heat-gun of Mars was ready in his hand.

Britt twisted till he could look out through a porthole. Outside, on the tumbled, rocky plain, he could see the Martians clustered about their leader. Then they scattered, and Rutnom's plan was quickly evident. Back and forth, back and forth the hunters quartered, each with his own small portion of the asteroid's surface to search.

Not a square inch of the territory would be left uncovered by this scheme. He groaned aloud. There was no hope that the precious box would escape scrutiny. What could Penger have been thinking of? Better to have pulled at the lid and thus destroyed the map.

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CHAPTER V

Strategy

PERHAPS he hoped that a patrol ship would rescue them in time. But the whirling asteroid and all its surface was a blur to a space wanderer. They were as effectually concealed as though they were a hundred feet below the surface. He became aware that the trader was talking.

But what was he saying? Despair clutched the lad's heart. Coldly, dispassionately, he was reviling the personal appearance, the ancestry, the habits of the guard.

"Britt, did you ever see anything like him? He's got the face of one of those little pigs that have just had a ring pushed through theirs snouts. And his body—if I were shaped like that I would have drowned myself long ago. Look at those eyes. Why, you can see the fear staring out of them. He's a coward, boy, that's why Rutnom left him behind. He's afraid of us, tied up as we are."

Now Haldane understood Penger's peculiar behavior, the strange air of amusement that had hovered about him through all this catastrophe, his inexplicable action. His mind had given away. The long years of loneliness, the death of his best friend, the capture by Rutnom, had smashed a brain that long had been famed as the keenest of all "Venus, Inc.'s" force.

"That ugly-looking Martian must be the misbegotten offspring of the foulest scum of his putrid planet." The quiet voice went on with its taunting. The Martian was standing it well, his watchful expression unchanged, but sooner or later Penger would get under his skin—and then—Britt hoped that the heat gun killed quickly.

"No, Britt, I'm not crazy." The youth was startled by his remark. "Just wanted to find out if the brute understood English. He doesn't. I've been using some of the worse insults you can apply to a Martian. Even if he had self-control enough not to do anything, his expression would have shown that he understood.

"If I had started whispering to you he would have been suspicious. But he thinks I'm simply cussing out our capture. Now listen."

In the same calm dispassionate tones Penger continued. And as he talked, Britt's despair was forgotten, and hope came to him again.

"You're near enough to the wall to get your feet against it," Arnim concluded. "So I guess the most dangerous part of the job will be yours. You know what to do. I'll follow your lead, but don't take too long to get set. Rutnom may tumble at any moment, and then we'll be through."

He fell silent, and both men closed their eyes and seemed to sleep. After a bit, Britt moved, restlessly, swung himself so that the soles of his feet were flat against the wall, and he was lying curled on his side.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, the merest slit. The Martian guard was still seated, ten feet away, still watchful. Then, with an explosion of energy, Britt drove his feet hard against the wall. His lithe body rose, catapulted across the ten-foot space, driven by muscles attuned to Earth's gravity.

Before the startled Martian realized what was happening, Britt's head struck his soft stomach with terrific force. Over he went with a grunt, as his weapon flew out of his hand and he instinctively threw his arms wide, clutching for support.

Meantime Arnim was whirling, over and over, across the floor. As he heard the crash of the Martian's collapse behind he brought up with a thump against the legs of the control desk. Above he saw the lever that controlled the ship. Straining upward, his teeth closed over the handle.

The corded muscles of his neck stood out as he wrenched backward with all the strength that was in him. For a moment the lever remained motionless. Then, as he drove his knees into the floor and jerked backward once again, the lever gave. Searing flames flared across his face, burned and blinded him, at the sudden cutting off of the current.

Britt, tumbling in unequal combat with the Martian giant, heard the roar of the rocket tubes stop. Then he felt the floor drop away beneath him, felt himself lifted, smashed against something. Blackness enveloped him. But even as he lost consciousness he heard a great shout of triumph from his leader.

A DASH of icy water in his face brought Haldane to. His head throbbed with pain, needle pricks stung his arms and legs. He raised a hand to his aching brow. Why, he was free! Arnim was bending over him.

"All right, lad? Are you all right?" he was asking anxiously.

"Yes. I guess so. A little dizzy, but that's all." He forced himself to a sitting position. "But you're burned!" Across Penger's face were three livid burns. One eye was closed by a white blister, half his scalp was a blackened patch of singed hair.

"A little." Penger grinned. "They had plenty of juice going through that control. Might have been worse. I got off lucky. So did you. Take a look at your late antagonist." Crumpled against the wall was the body of the guard. The queer angle at which his

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head lolled told the story of a broken neck.

"He was on top, luckily, when the smash came. You both flew through the air, but he hit the wall first, and made a cushion for you. I held onto the lever with my teeth, so I didn't get any of it. I'd like to see Rutnom's face now, down there, stuck on that asteroid with no way to get off." He gestured to the visoscreen.

The blackness of interstellar space was mirrored there, the far-off, glowing worlds, the nearer sun. And, tiny in the distance, a whirling, blurred ball that Britt recognized.

"Gosh, Mr. Penger, you've tricked him nicely. I never thought of the fact that the gravity of that little planet would not be sufficient to counteract the centrifugal force set up by its rapid i tation."

"No, and what is more important, neither did Rutnom. I was sure of that when you told me that he only had his top-rockets on when he landed, though I was almost certain when he talked about the box being down there. All he thought of was the lack of attraction, that's why he kept his tubes pressing the Satona down, since otherwise, he figured, an unguarded shove would send her careening off. He forgot that the asteroid itself was pushing away at her with a far stronger power."

"The box," a sudden thought struck Britt, "we've lost that. We'll have to go back to Venus and hunt for Mr. Bell's mine again."

Penger grinned.

"Nope. We'll get that back too."

"What do you mean? It must be hundreds of thousands of miles away by now, shooting through space. We can never find it."

"Wrong again, my lad. I know just where she is. And that was the most ticklish part of the whole scheme. Why do you think I kept my eye glued to that telescope while you were swearing at Rutnom?

The youngster looked at him blankly. The other went on, happily.

"I didn't swing around the asteroid the way I did in order to hide what I was doing from the Martians. In fact, I hoped that he would see. What I did was to throw the dispatch box out at just the moment and speed that would bring it sufficiently within the attraction of the little planet to make it a satellite, to keep it swinging around through space in an orbit of its own. Naturally, I didn't have time to calculate the exact conditions, but I took the chance and it worked."

"Great! Then all we have to do is to swing back there, spot it in the telescope, and scoop it up."

"Well," the other drawled in reply, "it's not going to be as easy as all that. You see, I pretty much burned out the works here on the Satona. About the only thing that's still in order is the artificial gravity device. I managed to get that hooked up again, but the rest is gone."

"Then we'll have to get across to the Wanderer, and use that."

"Right. Get into your space suit and we'll make a go for it."

They worked rapidly. Arnim felt for their flashes. They were intact in the outer pockets.

"Switch off your gravity control," he advised Britt. "We'll be able to maneuver better."

They were ready now. Penger led the way, threw open the outer lock. They stepped, curiously light, into outer space. The vacuum suits ballooned immediately.

FOR awhile they floated, while Arnim got his bearings. Directly ahead, not over fifty yards away, lay the glittering ball of the Wanderer. Below spun a jagged fragment of rock, the tiny asteroid they had just quitted.

Arnim chuckled grimly. He thought of Rutnom and the Martians marooned on that tiny desolation, helplessly watching the space ships drifting not more than five miles overhead.

Then he pulled out a little propulsion gun and, pointing it away from the Wanderer, pulled the trigger. He transformed himself into a very inefficient rocket-like projectile. Britt saw and wondered and did likewise.

But finally Penger flashed his beam over the smooth shining skin of the Wanderer. They were home.

His gloved hand found the airlock switch.

They were standing within the old familiar ship, denuded of their space suits. Britt was grinning happily. Arnim was at the electro-telescope, his eyes glued to the instrument, giving swift orders that Britt translated into instant action. The little flier swerved and accelerated; shot off on sudden swift angles. At last Penger motioned.

"Hold her there. We're right alongside."

He squirmed into his suit again, dived into the air lock. Britt waited intently. It was only five minutes before he returned, but to the anxious youngster it seemed hours. The precious argento-platenoid box with its even more precious contents was under his arm.

Ganymede was growing momentarily on their screen. Arnim was sprawling luxuriously in his hammock, head resting on thrown-back arms. He wore the sleepy contentment of a cat who had licked up all the cream.

Britt, however, was pacing restlessly to and fro, a worried frown on his clear boyish

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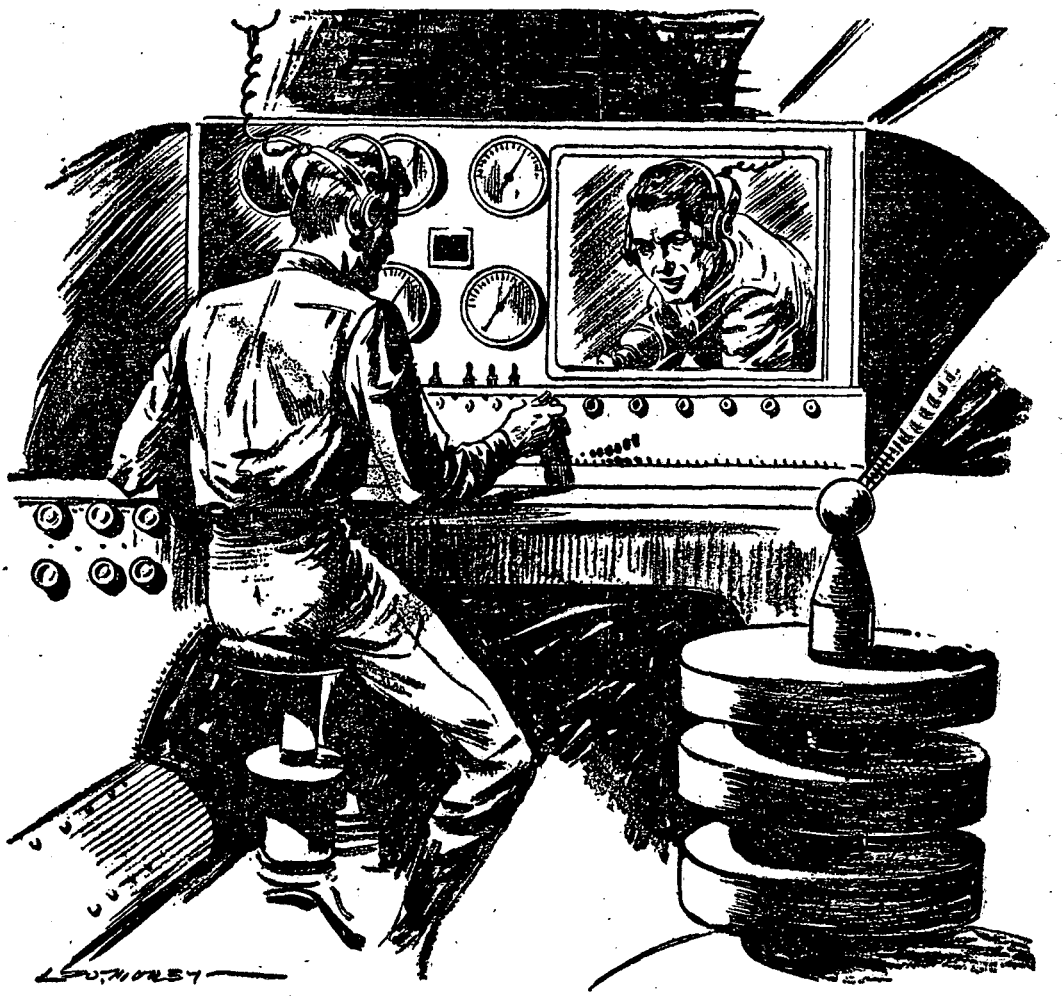

Joe Carnahan sat before the machine, waiting

FRIENDS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

When Joe Carnahan and Igor Vladek, the Bixby Twins, pool minds via telepathy, it's a challenge to trouble-makers!

THEY came to Joe Carnahan in his laboratory up in the Blue Ridge Mountains—two generals in a staff car, with other staff cars before and behind. One of the generals hrrrrrmphed and ahemmed and observed that the President wished to confer with Joe and—hrrrrmph—could it be arranged that news of his departure from his laboratory wouldn't be known for a few days? And Joe Carnahan suddenly looked very tired.

"It's happened, eh?" he said.

But the generals wouldn't answer that. They were very polite to him, but their conversation was mostly hrrrrmphs, and they looked at him rather fiercely.

Joe Carnahan was the most important single unit in the armed forces of the United

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States, and he knew it and they knew it too, and it embarrassed them. Because they wore smart uniforms and had staff cars and aides, and he was simply a rather pleasant-faced civilian. He was a very lonely man, too.

They rode toward Washington in the staff cars, paying no attention whatever to the speed limit. If Joe Carnahan drove too fast, a state policeman would give him a ticket, but the generals could drive as fast as they pleased. And they did.

"What's happened?" Joe said again, after the cars started off. "Who is it? Europia?"

Europia was that country of Middle Europe whose citizens called themselves Europians, as citizens of the United States took to themselves the title of Americans, and with an equal lack of approval from other nations on the same continent.

One of the generals said, hrrrrmph, that there was a certain amount of tension, and just as a matter of precaution it was desirable for Joe Carnahan to be on hand in Washington. But that nothing had happened yet, of course. Hrrrrmph.

"Meaning that it's bound to happen," said Joe Carnahan. "So it's been decided for us to strike first. You haven't been able to train anybody else to use the ky—"

The generals shushed him in a panicky haste. Even in their own staff cars they didn't want Joe Carnahan's most important military achievement to be named.

It was top priority, top drawer, number one extra confidential secret. It was a device that was simply the one unbeatable weapon in the world. Long-range rockets could be handled, now, with other rockets equipped with radar, proximity fuses, and other devices which ranged them alongside the enemy and kamikazed him. Bombers, too, were sitting ducks for guided missiles moving at supersonic speeds.

Radar-planes cruising in the stratosphere made sneak attacks of any sort quite impossible, and even the planting of atomic bombs by spies was pretty well impossible since Joe Carnahan had worked out a beautifully simple trick for detecting fissionable material.

BUT the ky—the top priority, top drawer, number one, super-secret military gadget was something else. There couldn't be any defense against the bombs it controlled. The only trouble was that you had to understand it, to make it work properly. The military men objected to a civilian handling it, and they tried hard to find a bright, brisk young officer with the necessary technical background and personal qualifications to handle it. But so far they'd failed. So Joe Carnahan had to be called in and hastily given assimilated rank when international crises arose.

"It's Europia?" he asked again. "When's zero hour?"

The two generals grew even more panicky. They had a good idea, but you can't tell a civilian the plans of the General Staff. They hrrrmphed and ahemmed and said that it was probably best to discuss the purpose of his call to Washington with the President. So Joe Carnahan leaned back in the staff-car and closed his eyes.

"I wish you'd found somebody else to handle the thing," he said tonelessly, after a pause. "I was Twinned with a Europian boy once. I rather liked him. His name was Igor Vladek. Ever hear of him?"

The general had, and they felt consternation. Everybody on earth had heard of Igor Vladek and of Joe Carnahan, too. They were the two outstanding figures in the world of science, and their discoveries uncannily seemed to have immediate and pressing importance to the world of men. But Joe had just told the generals that he and Igor Vladek had been closer to each other than any brothers ever were, when he told them they'd once been Twinned.

The staff cars rolled swiftly along the fine broad concrete highway toward Washington. Joe Carnahan felt rather sick. Igor Vladek would quite certainly be killed in the war that Joe was to fight, and he and Igor had been quite literally one mind and one thought, long ago.

They'd been among the first pairs of youths to be Twinned in Bixby's idealistic attempt to end international disagreements and distrust. Bixby, you remember, found a basic consciousness-frequency, to which any human brain could be tuned, and he made the Twinners.

People don't talk much about Twinners any more. They feel that it isn't a pleasant subject. Twinners, though, were little electronic devices in pairs. If you wore one of them and somebody else wore the other, the two of you became telepathic in regard to each other. Not only telepathic, though. You shared each other's consciousness completely. You knew everything the other person

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thought, and he knew everything you thought, and his memory was as open to you as your own.

It was Bixby's idea that if children or youths of different nations were Twinned with these devices, then every pair of twins would become a powerful force for international peace and understanding.

Joe Carnahan had been Twinned with Igor Vladek when they were both just fourteen years old. The time-difference between their home was just enough so that when one of the boys was most active the other might be inclined to loaf. They explored each other's brains with an absorbed interest, and each other's surroundings with fascinated attention. Within a week each knew all that the other had ever known and was as completely at home in the other's environment as in his own.

They liked each other. They knew each other more thoroughly and more completely than any two persons had ever been able to know each other before Twinning was devised. And Joe Carnahan would never be able to hate Europians, because a part of his boyhood memories were those of Igor Vladek, and Igor would never be able to hate Americans, because so many of his memories were those of Joe Carnahan.

Bixby's idea seemed like a good one, at first. Almost half a world apart, two fourteen-year-olds—who'd never seen each other in the flesh—lived in an intimacy that was unparalleled. Joe Carnahan knew what chamois-hunting was like, because Igor's father took Igor on a hunt. Igor Vladek knew exactly how to play center field.

Presently—when they were fifteen—Joe Carnahan shared the shy romance of Igor with a dark-eyed girl, and Igor knew exactly the sensations of taking a freckled high-school girl to a high-school dance. It was pretty wholesome for the two of them to be Twinned around that time. They didn't idealize each other, but they did like each other and neither wanted the other befouled. So it was probably the most satisfactory friendship that two people ever had. Joe Carnahan had been a very lonesome person after it ended.

RIDING into Washington in a staff car, with two uneasy generals beside him and other cars around to make the whole cavalcade conspicuous, Joe Carnahan remembered Igor Vladek with a wistful affection.

They'd always been friends. Other Twinned pairs revolted as they grew up. Twinning wasn't good for most people. Secret little weaknesses couldn't be kept secret, so Twinned people were defiantly open about them. Meanesses couldn't be hidden, or denied, so they were indulged.

Any little spot of rottenness in anybody who was Twinned was necessarily known to the person who was Twinned with him, and a great deal of rottenness is suppressed because it can be concealed. Twinning brought to light too many undesirable traits.

Twinned people turned up too frequently in the criminal courts, guilty of crimes they wouldn't have committed if their thoughts hadn't been shared by someone else.

So Twinning was forbidden by law, and Bixby died apparently of a broken heart, and his device was never used any more. It wasn't even used by psychiatrists, because a patient couldn't be examined without being able to examine the psychiatrist's mind too, and there are certain privacies—such as family life—that nobody will willingly expose.

But that came later. Joe Carnahan and Igor Vladek were friends as long as they were Twinned. They matched. Not that their minds were identical. They were complementary, and each acquired the other's knowledge and capacity.

At seventeen, Igor made a jet-motor that ultimately displaced the last of the old-style internal-combustion engines in Europia. Joe Carnahan had helped, of course. At eighteen, Joe produced a tricky, freakish wing-surface that lifted eight times as much per square foot as any plane-wing had ever lifted before. And Igor helped with that. They were air-minded, then.

And when they went to college—but Igor's was a university, and they were ten thousand miles apart—each had all the knowledge the other acquired, and Igor became unpopular with his professors because Joe was avidly reading American scientific magazines and Igor knew their contents long before they reached Europia. Of course Igor had a hand —or a mind—in it when in his junior year Joe turned up the heat-converter that made dynamos old-fashioned, and then Joe helped when Igor had problems to solve.

A long way away, over the pine-clad hills, the wireless masts of Arlington rose futilely. They were no longer used, but the Navy never gives up a shore-post. The thin white

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spire of the Washington Monument appeared. One of the generals in the staff car with Joe suddenly hrrrmphed loudly, and when Joe looked at him he said something obscure but important sounding and uneasy about security. If Joe had once been Twinned with a Europian matters didn't look so good.

"Twinning was ordered stopped all of fifteen years ago," said Joe patiently. "The Army knew that I'd been Twinned when they asked me to work on counter-bomb devices, and that was even earlier. But of course I don't mind if you raise the question of security."

To query his fitness for the handling of the nation's very top-drawer number one supersecret weapon was ironic. He'd invented it. It was put to him as a matter of obligation when the teeth were drawn from the United Nations' peace-enforcement arrangements. Igor had been asked to work for his government too, at about the same time. And they'd hated to stop being Twinned, but they had to.

They turned in their Bixby Devices three years before Twinning was outlawed, but they were still friends. Joe and Igor were practically one self, but on matters that had to be military secrets they couldn't continue to have one mind. Their obligations were different. Igor owed loyalty to Europia, and Joe to the United States. So they'd reluctantly separated their thoughts.

The staff car swerved in toward Washington past the Fort Meyer reservation, and presently the Arlington Bridge lay before them, and the staff cars closed in and swept across the Potomac and past the Lincoln Memorial. Joe Carnahan felt sick at what lay ahead of him.

He and Igor had written once or twice after they turned in their Twinners, but they'd had to stop that too. Their minds were too closely attuned. Joe knew intuitively what Igor had in the back of his mind, no matter how cryptically he phrased it. And Igor could read more than was wise in the baldest of sentences that Joe might write. They were employed in the task of making their respective nations safe against attack. They simply couldn't risk communication of any sort.

EVEN when they ceased to write—well—their minds had reached out and touched a few times. That was telepathy, perhaps, or thought-transference. It wasn't as complete as the old Twinning. Joe had been thinking of Igor, one night, and suddenly he felt Igor's friendly thought, and—sitting quite alone, ten thousand miles apart—for a little while they talked eagerly, if cagily.

They could veil their thoughts from each other when not wearing Twinners, but they knew each other too well to hide much very successfully. Perhaps three or four times they happened to think of each other simultaneously and their minds linked rather tenuously. But inevitably it was risky. So Joe Carnahan had been careful not to think about Igor these last few years.

He'd been pretty lonely.

The staff cars didn't go to the White House. They went to another place entirely, which normally it was much more difficult to get into. Then, Joe was escorted down underground and traveled for a surprising distance in a little car that ran by compressed air so that its movement could not be detected above-ground. And ultimately he reached a place so far below the surface that it was believed even atomic bombs couldn't blast it in.

Then the generals, hrrrrrmphing, turned Joe Carnahan over to a secretary, who escorted him to the man who had sent for him. That man was twitching with strain, and he tried to explain to Joe that everything possible had been done to smooth away the differences between the United States and Europia, but that the Europian government gave every sign of forcing the matter to war, and public opinion in the United States would not permit the American government to back down.

"I know," said Joe. He said it without heat. "Your party committed you at the last election. You won the election on an issue of foreign policy. You asked for this situation, and you're stuck with it, and if you back down without a war—why—your party might lose the next election."

The twitching man blinked at him. A secretary viewed Joe with startled disfavor. There are some public officials so exalted that it is a discourtesy to tell them the truth.

"All right," said Joe tiredly. "If you don't make a fight of it, somebody else will. The same thing's probably true in Europia. Elections have to be won, even if they cause wars. The question is simply who will make war first. It's my job to murder Europians for your political party, to keep them from murdering Americans for one of their

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political parties. When do I start?"

The twitching man said that it was the Government's intention to wait until the last possible instant in hope of some change in the European government's stand. Joe was to take his post. If he received the signal—which would be a word flashed on a television screen by the control-board—he was to take offensive action against Europia. The targets would have been listed for him, with their coordinates, by the General Staff.

"What am I, by the way?" asked Joe without interest. "Last time I was called on, I was told I was a lieutenant colonel. Nothing happened then."

The twitching man blinked helplessly. The secretary explained that Joe was still a lieutenant colonel. No higher rank could be granted to a civilian without official reserve status. War Department regulations were strict.

Joe smiled without mirth.

"All right," he repeated. "It was just to make the murder regular. I wanted to be sure I wasn't a civilian committing an atrocity."

He ignored them, thereafter, and examined his device. It was very large, and the parts that did the simplest things were the most complicated in construction.

He did not notice when the twitching man went out. He only noticed that the generals had come in when one of them hrrrrmphed at the other one.

"Well?" he said with a trace of impatience.

One of them ahemmed and said it would be an historic moment, and they wished to watch.

"Get out!" said Joe Carnahan savagely. "You bother me! I'm busy!"

One of the two generals hrrrmphed with such indignation that it sounded like a bugle, and said stiffly that he knew that Joe was merely an assimilated civilian, but nevertheless was subject to military discipline—

"Get out!" raged Joe Carnahan. "You can't even do your own murders! I've got to kill the best friend a man ever had!"

JOE glared at them, not making ready while they remained. After moments of indignant hrrrmphing they went out.

He picked up the sheets of coordinates. He set them up, savagely. He ran through the circuit-testing routine twice, once with one break to assure that the United States' top super-secret weapon did not go into action, and once with an entirely different break so that every part of every circuit was verified.

Then he was ready to commit the most monstrous murder ever engineered by men. Because if he did not commit it upon the people of another nation, it might be committed upon the people of the United States.

He sat down grimly in the operator's chair. He had sat there four times before. Three times for tests of the ky, the device. The fourth time when Russian politics required an international crisis for the benefit of those in power. That had been a near thing. A single long-range missle flung at the United States would have forced him to push down the plastic-handled "*Operation*" lever, and make such a holocaust as six years of the last war had hardly produced.

The room was very still. It was deep down in the bedrock under the alluvial soil of the city. It should be invulnerable. Joe Carnahan sat back and bitterly meditated upon patriotism as a virtue used by dynasts and demagogues to bloody all the pages of history. Men were trapped by it because other men were trapped by it. For him to close this circuit and that, and then push down the operations lever, would create the moment of greatest horror men had ever known. He would gain nothing by it. But he could not revolt against the order because another man in another nation might not revolt.

There was no decoration in this place. It had no thick carpet, nor stately furniture, because no eminent person held sway here. Only Joe Carnahan, who had made his country close to invulnerable in defense and irresistible in attack. And his reward was the order to kill.

He sat motionless, his lips twisted, waiting. He couldn't have made this machine if it hadn't been that he once was Twinned to Igor. He'd shared Igor's brain, and by that fact each of them had gained so that they were scientists whose work—except for such things as this—was good. They'd had a companionship that had made both of them what they were, and maybe Igor was at this moment sitting at the control-board of some such monstrous device, awaiting the command of another twitching politician.

Joe felt a thought from Igor's brain. It was oddly friendly. It formed words, and they formed the voice he'd heard so often with Igor's ears.

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"Sure," said Igor wryly, ten thousand miles away. "Sure, I'm waiting for orders to blow America to ruins. I don't like it either."

Joe Carnahan froze. Into his mind came bitterly the thought that he ought to send word somehow that Europia was ready to strike, too, so it could be anticipated. Then the thought that Igor knew those thoughts.

"Uh-huh," said Igor's voice in his brain. "Sure, I know. I know you didn't, too. Funny, huh?"

"Not a bit," said Joe, bitterly. He yearned toward Igor, and knew that Igor knew it. "I wish we could do something, Igor!"

He felt no self-consciousness. Igor knew what he was thinking. They were two people who knew each other so certainly that they didn't even have to pretend.

"What've you got, Joe?" asked Igor suddenly. "Maybe if you've got something we can't stand against, I can make my side back down."

Joe Carnahan tried, very carefully, to tell Igor—who was a part of himself, after all—what the top priority, top drawer, number one super-secret military gadget could do. Not what it was, but what it could do. He held his brain grimly away from the details of its construction. He concentrated on remembering the tests, and what they'd done to a mountain range in Antarctica.

"Yeah," said the phantom of Igor's voice in his brain. Then came pictures. Clear, lucid pictures. Not of the machine before Joe, but of another. Different here and there. Igor's machine. They'd been one brain for a long time, though in two bodies, and now their separated brains worked alike.

"Mine's like this. Must be the same idea."

BUT he already knew. When Joe Carnahan saw the pictures of Igor's machine, merely in recognizing the difference between the two, he'd told Igor every detail of his own.

"We're even Stephen," said Igor. There was the same grimness in his thought that had come to Joe. "We've got the same trick, Joe. The one who shoots last gets killed. What're we going to do?"

Their brains merged more fully, and for a time Joe was not conscious of question and answer, of separate thoughts. The linkage between them, made possible by their long attuning to each other, became intensified by the identity of their emotions. They were one brain again, thinking together like a man thinking to himself. But there were two minds throwing thoughts into focus for joint examination.

When the signal to fire came upon one of the two television-screens, both knew it at the same instant. If one fired, both would, and the holocaust would be equal in both nations.

"No use in that, Joe," said Igor's thought. "Look! We'll shift coordinates and fire! Testing my outfit, I worked in Antarctica too! Remember your coordinates for testing? We blast hell out of the South Pole!"

They were one mind in two bodies, as they'd been long years before. Their hands worked swiftly, together, making competely different motions with no confusion at all. Only long practise could have given them that. It felt extraordinarly good to be one brain with Igor again, and Joe Carnahan felt a surge of emotion from his friend at the controls of the machine which had been intended to devastate the United States.

"Feels good, huh?"

Igor felt as Joe did. And Joe, his face pale and tense and his fingers flying at the setting up of new coordinates, felt as if he were grinning at his brain-twin.

The second television-screen flashed the signal. Joe Carnahan was ordered to attack Europia. The two sets of fingers, almost half a world apart, finished their tasks. And then the two of them reached out their hands and, somehow grinning at each other, pushed down the *"Operations"* handles on their separate machines.

Sheer annihilation rose into the air, whining thinly. The sound of its going ceased as its component parts vanished. For long, long seconds it would streak through space, and where it landed there would be nothingness. It would strike with such speed that no detector-device could register its coming in time to actuate a counter-weapon. And when it had struck there would be—simply nothing at all.

There was a little clanging noise somewhere in the machine before Joe Carnahan. It was finished. He relaxed. He felt good. He felt clean. He felt Igor grinning with him, beyond an ocean and half a continent more. And swiftly, swiftly the two minds flung thoughts together for examination and Joe Carnahan realized that for the first time in long, long years he was not lonely.

He knew—they knew—that the operation of the two devices had been known to others

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than themselves. In seconds, now, broadcasts would begin. Justifying, indignant broadcasts. The people of the United States would be told of the imminent danger in which it had been, and that only instant and overwhelming attack by the ever-ready defense forces of the country had forestalled a murderous and unwarned attack by Europia.

The people of Europia would also be told of the monstrous and shameful intention of the United States to rain down annihilation. And both nations would be told that the danger was past since the other nation lay in ruins.

"They're going to be wrathy and also scared, when they find out we've double-crossed them," said Igor, grinning. "They'll probably shoot us. Certainly me. And then they'll try it again. Can't we do something about that, Joe? I think we can."

One brain again. Gleefully, zestfully working it out.

* * * * *

"The fact is simply that Igor Vladek and I decided to call off the war," said Joe Carnahan evenly to the staring figures who faced him. "We were Twinned, once upon a time. We know each other pretty well. We decided to call off the whole thing. For good."

The supreme general was too dazed even to hrrrmph.

"But we announced the destruction of Europia!" he bellowed. "By broadcast! We've been made fools of!"

THIS brought a smile to Joe's lips.

"The generals in Europia are just as bad off," he said gently. "They went out on a limb, too. But I'm telling you what has to happen. You've got to make peace. Igor and I have made a compact. If anything happens to him I'll use the ky—." He stopped, and smiled faintly. "I'll use the device I was brought to Washington to use. He will keep his country from using a similar device as long as he's alive. When he's dead, it will be necessary to smash Europia unless peace is absolutely certain forever.

"Furthermore, if anything happens to me, he'll do the same thing for the same patriotic reason. Every other weapon is stalemated, remember. And Igor and I have done trivial things to our machines that nobody else would be likely to understand. They could never make the machines work again."

The twitching man was ashen-faced, now.

"What—what are we going to do?" he demanded in a trembling voice. "We—we— "

"You're going to make peace," said Joe gently. Even if it costs your party the next election. You're going to make peace because you can't make war. Europia is in the same predicament. As long as Igor and I are both alive, you're going to have peace whether you like it or not!"

He turned and walked quietly toward the door. Nobody tried to stop him. They were still too dazed. He stopped in the doorway, merely a pleasant-faced civilian and by no means as impressive as the generals or even the statesmen.

"Wouldn't someone like to say 'Long live Joe Carnahan!'?" he asked mildly.

* * * * *

In the hired car going back to his laboratory, he felt Igor's thoughts touching his mind again, and he grinned. He knew Igor was grinning too.

"They're going crazy over here," said Igor comfortably. "Now they say I've bet the life of my country on my own life. Oh, their raging! But the American broadcasts were picked up and they know I told them the truth. We've got to find some way to make peace sure no matter what happens to us, Joe."

The Blue Ridge rose up like a rampart against the sky ahead. All about was rolling country. Nice country. Unravaged and beautiful to look at and smell and feel. The car he had been using now had no escort of staff cars or attending generals;

"I've been thinking. Bixby Twinner, you remember, picked up the consciousness of the one who wore it and transmitted to its matched companion. I've got an idea that we could pick up consciousness without a Twinner. Pick up the consciousness of individual people. And there should be a way to let them be broadcast so everybody could receive them without Twinners."

He stopped thinking in words. The two of them were one brain. His thoughts leaped ahead, and Joe Carnahan knew that his friend Igor Vladek, far away in Europia, was shaking with mirth as he savored the devastating possibilities in the new device Joe proposed.

It was a new weapon. An invincible weapon: Joe proposed to give to the American Government a perfect weapon to enforce peace and secure justice. It was a weapon that would destroy any foreign government overnight.

(Concluded on page 97)

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"This," said the Traveler, "is manganese steel!"

TRAVELER'S TALE

By GEORGE WHITLEY

A man comes out of time to Pardi's Village—and is shocked to realization of the truth of his journey!

THE bitter wind swept down the valley, bringing with it flurries of sleet. Pardi shivered a little in the deep folds of his dogskin robe and stared resentfully at the bleak, gray sky, unconsciously tightening his grip on his metal-tipped spear.

As hereditary priest of the tribe, he was supposed to be able to exercise a certain control over the weather—but he knew well that such supernatural powers as were ascribed to him existed only in the minds of the more credulous of his flock. The others, most of the men and—even—some of the women, treated him with a half contemptuous tolerance.

Pardi wrenched his mind away from the distasteful track that it was following and thought, instead—it did not require much effort—of the warm, crackling fire in his hut, where Muri, his wife, awaited him.

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What a fool he had been not to let one of the acolytes keep today's watch! And yet—somehow he knew that this was the day on which the Traveler would come to answer all the questions that had for so long troubled the wise men of the tribes.

The priest found shelter of a sort in the lee of one of the strange, grass-covered mounds which, in almost regular array, covered the floor of the valley. From this vantage point he could watch the Circle, that weird, inexplicable phenomenon that had been there since before the memory of the oldest man, that was, according to tribal lore, older than the race itself, without end and without beginning.

The Highway of the Gods, men said it was. Or, as some said—and this legend had always persisted among the priesthood—the highway of the great sorcerers, of men like gods.

It was always calm within the Circle, although the air within its bounds had a sort of quivering tenseness. Neither rain nor snow, neither dust nor mist, seemed able to cross the magic frontier that divided the Circle from the everyday world.

A man, though, could enter its charmed limits. Men had done so. And these men had died, without exception, stricken by some strange ailment that defied all the skill of the tribe's medicine men.

They had died, raving in their last delirium of thundering fire from the earth leaping to meet screaming fire from the sky, of great stone huts, piled one upon the other, crashing in blazing ruin, of monstrous birds making the heavens their battlefield and diving in incandescent death.

Perhaps, thought Pardi, when I am very old I shall enter the Circle. But not yet. Life is not good, neither is it bad. But I should like to see these wonders before I die.

Down the wind came a longdrawn, eerie ululation, the hunting cry of the wild dogs. Was it cattle they were hounding or was it some luckless man or woman? The priest mumbled a half-believed invocation to his dim gods, prayed that the pack would not come his way.

They were devils, these dogs. Man they did not fear and, more often than not, their cunning was more than a match for his weapons, his clumsy but cruel traps.

Pardi breathed a sigh of relief as the menacing sound died away in the distance.

Then—he caught his breath in sudden panic.

Had the pack, or had another pack, crept unobserved up the valley? That new, shrill whining was never the wind. Neither, the priest realized, after a long moment's agonized apprehension, was it made by any animal. It came from inside the Circle.

OTHER savages would have turned and fled, but not Pardi. Like so many of his cloth, in all ages and all countries, he was not superstitious. Besides, this was the moment to which he had been dedicated, he and Pardi his father and Pardi, *his* father, for untold centuries in the dim past of the tribe.

This must surely be the advent of the Traveler!

Within the Circle danced a lambent blue flame, waxing and waning as the volume of the sound rose and fell. At times it was almost invisible, then, again, it would flare to eye-searing brilliance.

Had it been a fire such as Pardi knew, he would have felt its warmth from where he stood. But there was no heat, nothing but that uncanny dancing light that made the dark valley seem more than ever a place of gloom and desolation.

Dim outlines shaped themselves within the pale, flickering fire, the shadow of what appeared to be a sort of a cage or skeleton framework. Behind the weaving rods was the figure of a man, ghostly as yet, insubstantial as the snow wraiths that whirled down the valley, yet gaining substance with every passing moment.

Abruptly, the blue light flared for a last time and steadied to constant intensity. At the same time the noise of the fire reached an unbearably high, almost supersonic pitch and thereafter was audible only as a thin, high whistle.

As Pardi stared, fascinated by that intricate complexity of bars and rods, no longer in motion but seeming to draw the vision down through untold, interminable vistas of space and time, the Traveler stepped from the heart of his singing flame and stood, just inside the Circle, gazing about him with a certain bewilderment.

"Strange—" Pardi heard him mutter, "Can it be the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle? The instruments shouldn't, can't, lie. But I've certainly come the wrong way!"

The priest stored the strange expressions

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in his memory. They must, he decided, be words of power. Or, perhaps, the Traveler was offering thanks to his strange gods.

Meanwhile the Traveler had returned to his strange hut of magic rods, was peering at certain small, white circles affixed to a flat board on the side furthest away from Pardi. Once again he came into the open, this time stepping outside the borders of the Circle.

He was, Pardi saw, of about his own height, but with the smooth face of a woman or boy. He was clothed in what seemed to be garments of some woolen weave, but of a texture infinitely finer than that made by the women of the tribe from the poor fleece of the little, half-wild sheep.

A strange framework, resting on the bridge of his nose, covered the upper part of his face. This held, before the Traveler's eyes, two little round windows filled with some transparent substance like ice.

And the man himself? He was, Pardi decided, of the type that, in this day, filled the ranks of the priesthood. Given garments like Pardi's he would have passed for Pardi's brother. This, then, was no god, but some great sorcerer.

A faint, pale ghost of the steady flame within the Circle still clung to the Traveler. Seeing him glowing thus, wanly luminous against the dark background of the valley, the priest felt more than half inclined to revise his original opinion.

The searching eyes behind those little, icy windows found Pardi.

"Good heavens!" cried the Traveler, "a Stone Age man! Hope he's not hostile. I wonder if I can persuade him to come back with me. But how?"

Pardi spoke.

"You are the Traveler," he said.

IT WASN'T a question, it was a statement. There was a certain awe, a suspicion of reverence, in the tones in which it was said —but it was not the superstitious terror that one would expect from an ignorant savage.

Rather it was as though one professional man were addressing another, far superior in rank and qualifications, but, still, no more than a practitioner of the same art.

The Traveler stiffened, as does the wild dog when the arrow finds the mark. He stared at the priest with even greater wonderment than that with which Pardi was regarding him.

"Yes," he said at last. "I am a traveler. Out of time. You were expecting me?"

"Of course. Has not the Circle, the Highway of the Great Sorcerers, been here since before the beginning of Time?"

"Before the gods that made the gods had drunk at dawn their fill," quoted the Traveler softly.

"You know the ritual!" shouted Pardi excitedly. "Then you are indeed one of us. And now I know that my sons' sons, or their sons, will be sorcerers such as you, with power undreamed of. But this is heartening news.

"For, year by year, we few holders of the ancient wisdom see that same wisdom fade. Much my father told me, and much I have forgotten. My sons, too, will forget. And it seems that as we of the tribes sink into the swamp of not-knowing, so our enemies, the dogs and the rats, grow fiercer and more cunning.

"My father told me that there was a tribe only two days' march from my village. Last warm season, when the days are long, our young men—we have so few women now —set out to visit them. They found their empty huts, and the ashes of their fires. And their bones."

"So, friend—how do they call you? Pardi? So, friend Pardi, I have brought you hope. Of that I am glad. Even though my—magic did not work properly and sent me the wrong way in time, my journey has not been fruitless. Perhaps I have changed the course of history.

"I will tell you the truth. I, too, was seeking aid. In my time there are certain evil men who would rule the world. And there is raging a battle of sorcerers, our magic against theirs.

"I thought that, at some time in the future, I would find magicians even more clever than ourselves who would put into our hands weapons with which we could save the world."

"A battle of sorcerers?" broke in Pardi eagerly. "Then the old tales are true."

"What old tales?"

"Now and again, a bold man has entered the Circle. And he has died."

"You mean that there is a tabu?"

"Tabu? What is that?" He must have read the other's meaning in his eyes. "No. We did not kill them. They died."

"How?"

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"They shone with pale, cold fire, just as you are doing, but not so brightly." The Traveler looked down at his hands with shocked surprise. "And they seemed to waste away. And they told stories of what they had seen within the Circle."

"What did they see?" demanded the Traveler, his voice urgent.

"Fire from the earth leaping to meet fire from the sky, great stone huts, piled hut on hut, to the height of twenty or more, tumbling down in flames, huge birds fighting all along the sky."

THE Traveler had paled, but his manner was icy calm. He had drawn from a pouch in his clothing a little bundle of white sheets, bound around with what looked like leather. On these sheets he was making marks with a little, pointed stick.

"What else?" he asked. "What else?"

"Nothing. Only pictures of people like us, dressed like us; and, of course, now and again a pack of dogs."

"It could be," said the Traveler slowly. "It could be. But now that I have come back to this forgotten age I must have altered history. Instead of an A, B, C, D sequence it will be A plus X, B plus X, and so on—with myself as X. But tell me about yourself, Pardi. You are a priest, I take it?"

"Yes."

"What is your god?"

"There are many gods. But I serve Arp."

The pencil scribbled on.

And then, having at last drawn from Pardi his pitiful stock of half-forgotten knowledge, his rather greater accumulation of tribal lore and history, the Traveler talked.

He talked of all the wonders that would be, of huge, floating cities crossing the great waters at speeds beyond the priest's comprehension, of great, mechanical birds that would make the most distant lands, lands undreamed of by Pardi, within the compass of a day's march.

And of these same lands he talked, lands where it was always summer, where great, luscious fruit hung, ripe and ready for the plucking, from every tree, and where there were strange men whose skins were yellow, black or brown.

And, he concluded, men were even reaching out towards the very stars. The world was theirs, and all the fullness thereof. Were there not fresh worlds for conquest in th sky?

All this was meat and drink to Pardi. H would never see these things—but his sor would, or their sons. And he, who ha viewed the slow, seemingly inevitable deca of the race with unrelieved pessimism no allowed himself to dream of the brigh distant future.

But the Traveler seemed anxious. At in creasingly frequent intervals he raised h wrist to glance at a little device strapp thereon.

"I must be getting back," he said at las

"I wish you could stay with us," replie Pardi.

"I do too. But I, also, have a wife who i waiting for me. And if I delay my retur much longer I shall be marooned here for ever."

"But why?"

"How can I explain? You have bows an arrows, haven't you? Well, my time ma chine has stretched the very structure of- things, just as your arm will stretch th string of a bow. But your arm will tir Sooner or later you must release the strin

"Besides—" Once again the Travele raised his hand but, this time, to look wit apprehension at the pale radiance emanat ing from his flesh.

"Before you go," said Pardi, "there is little custom among my people. The ex change of gifts. I should—" he fumbled fo words.

"Of course," said the Traveler. "But—

He ran his hands through his pocket seeking something that would be of valu to the other. Nothing. But wait—his watc It was of metal, and its strap was of meta and it would, therefore, be immune to th slow decay and disintegration of atomi structure affecting any organic matter com ing within the influence of the time machine

"Here," he said. "It is a device for tellin the passage of time. Every day you mus wind it—so. And it will have to be set, lik this. Do this on a sunny day at high noon."

Inside the Time Machine a red light wa flashing and a little bell was ringing.

PARDI took the proffered gift, his fac that of one who has received an acco lade. Words failed him. Mutely, he thrus the haft of his spear into the Traveler' hands. With an expression of thanks it wa taken. The Traveler examined it, lookin

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curiously at the workmanship and crude, feeble attempts at ornamentation.

"But what is this?" he cried, pointing at the head.

"That? Oh, it is a kind of stone we find in the ground. Some is good and some is eaten away with a sort of red rottenness. We even find some already shaped into things, some useful, and some the use of which is beyond our ken. My wife Muri has a fine cooking pot of this ringing stone. Do you know what it is, then?"

"This is manganese steel!"

What a fool I was! thought the Traveler. The instruments didn't, couldn't, lie. And it all dovetails so perfectly. Pardi, an obvious corruption of Padre, those regular mounds that can only be ruins, and—most obvious of all—a common language. That was too obvious—so obvious that I never even noticed it.

He would have liked to have shaken hands with the priest, but feared that his strange affliction might prove contagious.

"Goodby," he said. "And good luck."

"You will return?"

"I am afraid not." He looked again at his glowing hands. He was afraid, very much afraid. But what did it matter?

"Before you go," Pardi's voice was insistent, "tell me—how long must my sons, and their sons, and *their* sons, wait before all the wonders of which you spoke come to pass?"

"But I don't—" began the Traveler, then checked himself. Why shatter the dream of this primitive idealist? "Many generations," he lied. "Ten, at the very least." Then, again, "Goodby."

Slowly, he entered the charmed confines of the Circle. For a moment he stood among the intricacies of his machine, hand upraised in a gesture of farewell. It seemed to Pardi, then, that he touched something on the board.

The red light ceased flashing. There was nothing.

* * * * *

It was very dark in the valley and it was snowing hard. Pardi stared, hardly able to believe his eyes. The floor of the Circle, the Highway of the Gods, was already coated with a thin powdering of white. There was no longer anything to distinguish it from the rest of the valley. It was as though it had never existed.

Pardi mourned for his friend—for the ritual exchange of gifts had a significance undreamed by the Traveler. Yet, even as he mourned, he wished that he had buried his spear in the Traveler's heart as he set foot outside the Circle. For he had given Pardi dreams—and then had shattered those dreams.

He had not even lied convincingly.

It would have been kinder, too, for him, mused the priest. For I, with my spear with its head of the ringing stone, slew his dreams. . .

Abruptly, he turned away from the Place of the Circle.

The Traveler's gift, unheeded, still clutched in his right hand, he began the long trudge back to the unloved and unlovely squalor of his home.

Out of the night came the approaching cry of a hunting pack.

It was very cold and dark.

FRIENDS

(Concluded from page 92)

It was a device that would enable the American Government to pick up and broadcast to the people of Europia exactly what the rulers of Europia were thinking, with such complete transmission of those rulers' consciousness that the people of Europia would know absolutely that there was no fake about it.

And Igor would give exactly the same weapon to his own government, to reveal to the people of America the most private thoughts of their legislators and political lights!

That weapon would be more deadly than armies. More annihilating than atomic bombs. No government on earth could stand after the exposure of its members' private thoughts! And this weapon made every other weapon too deadly to be used, because the use of any other weapon might provoke retaliation by this.

Joe Carnahan smiled as Igor shook with laughter, ten thousand miles away. He and Igor were Twinned again. They were friends as two people had never been friends before, though they'd never seen each other in the flesh and never would.

Riding back to his laboratory, Joe Carnahan felt a warm, inner satisfaction. He would never be lonely again.

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(Continued from page 10)

dreams. Eh? Ah well. The pic for the Vance yarn was good, except for that face on the BEM. Those ears! That mouth! Those horrible eyes! Quick, Waldo, switch on the radio—there must be a cure for this advertised somewhere between *Sam's Thirty-seventh Wife* and *Life Can be Horribler Than You Think.* Marchioni was his usual weird self. Banish the man to Bikini! Make him read space-pirate stories forever! No, wait. I retract that last. It is too horrible.

The Ether Vibrates was gay, per usual. I think the Xeno, etc., is okay—just don't overdo it. But a little humor helps the department vastly. A mere pile of letters is apt to be dull. Not if they're all like Joe Kennedy's, however. That picture Chad Oliver sent you is fascinating. That handsome brute on the left looks just like Chad. Strange. And, for posterity and to keep peace on the team, "Snaggletooth" is Barry Hall, "Frogeyes" (he appreciated that, you may be sure, as did the rest of us) is Arleigh King, and "Wart-ears" is Billy Davenport. There, fellas—let me up now.—*1311 25th Street, Galveston, Texas.*

Well, Chad old skate, since the pictures mentioned preceded the passing into oblivion of Wart-Ears, Frogeyes and Snaggletooth by just one issue, Messers Hall, King and Davenport (just thinking of the last-named brings on a colossal yawn) should feel highly flattered. Posterity has not passed them by.

Otherwise, and always skipping the cover comment *(mais toujours!)* your letter was and is much appreciated. Since you like the galloping Kuttner fantasies, look for LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE in the issue after next!

IT MAKES OUR BROW TO MOP!
by William E. Rose

Mr. Sarge or Serge or Sergeant,
Oh! I feel the need most urgent,
To unburden my poor shrinking pent up soul!
If I could find you at my leisure,
I would have the utmost pleasure
In the flaying and dissecting of your scabrous, scaly hide.
At your inane shouts of "Xeno",
I could bust you on the bean-o
And commit you to the Styx's turgid tide!
Every time you mention "Snaggle",
On your hulk I'd like to haggle
With a lethal edged weapon, sharp and fine.
I have scanned your latest picture,
In the football garb and fixture,
As you strive to dupe and trick us all to believe
That you have some slight gray matter,
Mixed within the vapid batter
Where your braincells are supposed to be!
Now I really hate to ask you,
But from my heart I'd truly task you
To refrain from foolish prattle,
And your endless silly rattle
Of your "Xeno" and your Wart Ears and your "Snag",
This request is staid and humble,
So forgive me if I stumble
In a verbose galaxy of words,
For I fain would mouth a trenfal
To escape the anguish mental
Of the Sargeants' Snaggle-Xenoed-ego-blasted tripe!

P.S. You do have a good magazine.—*P.O. Box 430 Beaumont, Texas.*

Beaumont's no more a Tiger Cub
It's joined the Yankee trail
Instead of Wakefield, Row or Hub
The cheers ring for MacPhail
And if where STF's concerned
This seems a bit off-season
The Sarge, no worm, at last has turned
Believe me, he has reason

Sans stooges and his trusty keg
His Xeno and space lingo
This Old Space Dog no more can peg
To plate from left field on the wingo.

So cease your gripings if you can
At least this so-and-so can scan.

SNEARY BEERY BIM
by Rick Sneary

Dear Sarge: So you at last are going to let the fans tell you were to go. Well, well, hope you like worm weather. But really here is my suggestions. Cut all the hafe-baked space take, and Xeno burbing. Cut the corrny puns and slip-slopish answers to questions. Keep you reather good wit, and nice ways. And you can surely be alowed to return in kine anything you get from readers. (Poems and the like). In other words just be a plane editor of the letters. I would hate to think that there wouldn't be any answers to the letters. But please, no more Corn.

And now to the Summer issue of *Startling Stories.*

I won't say anything was wrong with the cover. Bergey is a good artist most of the time, but his themes are all shot, and some what of a discrace, but you won't change, so why kick. Could you tell me if the part of the story the cover illustrated was written in after the cover was done? the action wasn't very importen and had little bareing on the rest, yet it fited the cover so well. Would be a reather good idea. While I am asking questions, how about telling me how her clothes got riped in just the right places? And oh yes, how do you get into *that time* world?

Say who did the drawing on page 11. It looks a little like Finley. I'm not up on pro-artist, but this is one of the best pics you have had in a couple years. The one on page 9 coming a close second. Who did it, and keep who ever it was. Great. Your other man. Harchion I believe, is not so good. He uses a T-square to much. But at least we are used to him.

They story by Kuttner was of course good. You expect his to be. How anyone can write that much, and still be good is beyond me. It was a little "off-trail" but very nice. I personally thought there was something lacking in the ending, but it wasn't anything, and my friends disagreed with me, saying it was a swell ending.

None of the shorts were outstanding this time. They had a few good ideas and weren't bad reading, but there was no meat in them. Rocklynne's idea was reather new, more than you can say for Cross, tho he handled it well. The hall of Fame, ggaapfffft.

ETHERGRAMS.

So the mighty JoKe is back. Well good. But don't tell us he got that all on two pages. The rest of ther letter were pretty good. David Olson is a real promising letter hack. If I thought you meant what you said about my letter puting you on the brink of the screaming-meemies I'd come back and give you a push.

Only remark I want to make about the Fanzine review is the way you handled MAXIN 96. I don't have a copy, but I have heard about it. How you could be so nasty and yet not name names was wonderfull. Only a fan could understand what you meant. I think you handled it very nicely, better than some would.

Before I go, how about a letter contest? Huh? Give a pic to the best letter. Just one pic even. Huh, why not?

Oh yes, I see Wellman is bringing Captain Future back next issue. I hope it is good. Some of CF aren't, and Wellman has such a style of his own. He is good but . . . his big sute if picturing the viewpoint of other races. I hope this next story don't drop into that kine of thing. CF has to much of a thud and

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blunder past for such a thing. Not that it might not be better.—*Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, Calif.*

At first we thought it was a gag. But Brother Sneary had the improvidence to send along a postcard asking us to let him know whether the letter was to be used et cetera. One of the check-off questions was, "Are there *to* many misspellings?"

The answer is self-evident. Well, we've always wanted to run a fan letter as is to let you literateurs and literateuses know why we are only allowed out of our straightjacket for five-minute intervals, every hour on the hour, in the iron lung. Incidentally, Rick, thanks for the plug on our handling of the Maxin horror and don't cut English classes this year, if only for our sake!

STRICTLY UNION!

by Raymond F. Hass

Dear Sgt. Saturn:—This is my first letter to any magazine, but as this is a free country, I am going to express a gripe that I hope will end all gripes. I am getting sick and tired, fed-up and generally nauseated from reading some of these self-appointed, wouldbe humorouscritics. For —'s sake if Chad Oliver, Joe Kennedy, Rick Sneary, Howard Gabriel—etc., ad nauseum don't like the "STF" fiction magazines they buy, why do they waste their pennies in buying the magazines and then spending postage panning their purchases? It reminds me of the hound-dog howling about sitting on a sand-burr and being too lazy to get off it.

I, for one, do not need some egotistical, kindergarten undergraduate exhibitionist to air his labored, unfunny remarks concerning his uninteresting reactions to the world to guide me in what I want to read. If Kennedey and all the rest of the knocker's club MUST see their names in print, why don't they write a story or draw a few illustrations and earn renown instead of notoriety. Honest effort pays off better than panning your betters.

If you do not know your job as an editor any better than to need help from such a bunch, get off it for a better man. I don't think that is the case, or I, and several thousand more fans would not be buying, reading and enjoying nearly everything you select and print for us.

If you must have a letter-section (which wastes the space that could be much better employed in printing another story) why not have letters where the writers have something to say, and *say* it without trying to act like a five-year-old "acting-up" in front of company? But for Heaven's sake if you have a contract to publish the effusions of some of these wish-they-were-funny men, publish a magazine, call it "Moron's Delight" and let them continue to see their names in print. Print their pictures with their letters, and I imagine that your "BEM" problem would be solved.

I read practically all of the scientific fiction magazines published, and in every one that has a letter-section, some one or more of these birds are smelling up the ether with their so-called humor. It has long passed the boiling-point, and the above is the reaction.—*306 E. Borley Ave., Mishawaka, Ind.*

The author of this epistle is, according to his letterhead, Financial-Treasurer (seems a trifle redundant, does it not?) of United Musicians, Local Industrial Union No. 1091, C.I.O., South Bend, Indiana.

As for his differentiation between honest effort and the noble art of panning our bet-

[*Turn page*]

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ters, it leaves us at a loss. The world knows how difficult it is to pay an honest compliment with aplomb and no verbal falling over one's own shoelaces.

But the world also knows that every knock is a boost. Therefore, since a slap in the puss and a verbal laudation rate equally, panning the be-whathaveyou out of anyone should certainly come under the honest effort heading.

UGH! UGH!
by Millard Grimes

Dear Sarge: Ugh! The preceding is an accurate word description of the latest Bergey monstrosity adorning the cover of Startling. I thought I had seen some bad frontispieces but this one takes all the cake. I see Bergey has invented a new type of bem or do you call that erstwhile Veronica Lake a woman?

There are also a bunch of LAMS in the picture. (Note that word LAMS. It is term I have invented for Bergey's long-armed monsters—Long Armed Mems. I expect to receive much credit for this unique new expression. Henceforth fans will have night-mares about Bems and—also Lams.

You really had a swell vibrating of the ether this time, Sarge. Kennedy's letter was a masterpiece. Another satire that I found enjoyable was Olson's analysis of the March cover. Will look forward to seeing his analysis of present cover.

As to your own questions, I definitely think you should continue as the Seargent from Saturn. Your impersonation gives the mag color and it also makes it unique in having a different type of letter section (in a way). When you think of Startling, you always think of Sarge and the boys. Nope, the book wouldn't be quite the same without you.

Finally getting around to stories, we find that "Dark World" is as good as you claim as far as writing is concerned. Yep, to me, it was a powerful tale, full of power that is.

I especially liked the scenes when Ganelon was in the tower of Ghast Rymi, and in the chamber of Lyr. My only objection is that it was fantasy. I'm touchy but I like to see only sf in Startling. Hall of Famer was best since "Isle of Unreason." Yep, Hamilton wrote it too. Your shorts are really improving.—*2307 Tenth Street, Columbus, Georgia.*

Well, thanks, Millard, in spite of the unkind cuff at Bergey's semi-bald pate. Incidentally, off him it looks good.

SNAGGIE'S PAL
by James Patton

Dear Sarge: Yesterday I went into a news stand. Ah! S.S. summer issue is here! I hastily put down the money and went home. Then I turned to the Ether Vibrates. Horrors! Unthinkable! The Sarge asks us if he should shut up Snaggie, Froggie, Warty, and throw away the Xeno.

NO!

Then comes the next paragraph asking whether things should stay the same.

YES!

Hmm. The next paragraph suggests a compromise.

No.

Gee Whiz! Why ever ask such questions? Just go to a news stand and buy some other S. F. mag. Turn to the readers' department. Does any other editor spend time answering poem for poem, or answer each letter printed there with a paragraph or two? No. S.S. & T.W.S. are distinguished from other magazines because they have fantasy even in the readers department (Xeno, Wart Ears etc.).

They print in S.S. & T.W.S. drawings the fans make of Sarge. Does any other editor print a fan's sketch of him? No. Let's keep Sargeant Saturn the way he is. That is my vote, and you other fans write in and tell Sarge you want him to stay with all the trimmings. Let's keep S.S. & T.W.S. with their mark of distinction, SARGEANT SATURN. I really enjoy the Sarge's comments and poems. The mag just wouldn't seem the same without him. So everyone vote for Sgt. Saturn.

Now the stories. "The Dark World" by Kuttner was Terrific. And you fans that yell about tthe cover. Well this time I couldn't see anything that didn't fit the story. And as for how the cover looked, well she looked all right (I saw the man too).

And now the short stories. The "Vicious Circle" by Polton Cross should be made a Hall of Fame Classic. I liked "The Man With The X-Ray Eyes" least of the short stories (the others were about equal) but it was good. Oh, oh, somebody will fuss about the illustration for "The Man With The X-Ray Eyes" because it says underneath "he *heard*—." Well we know he was lip reading, but to have explained it there would have made the sentence longer and there is an ink shortage. There is isn't there?

And to you Sarge I send a can of dehydrated Xeno as good luck toward the outcome of the poll.—*Route 2, Clovis, New Mexico.*

With a rueful glance at the dehydrated Xeno, the Sarge bows low in welcome to neophyte James Patton, who surely is a king among men, a peerless judge of wine, women, horseflesh, symphonic music, gutbucket and res scientifictionae.

But since we have cast the die toward compromise measures, we can only promise to stay in there, lorn perhaps without our gremlins, and pitch. We're still giving poem for poem anyway. And when enough reprehensible likenesses of ye Sarge turn up, we plan to run them as a separate feature. Think—an art gallery of nothing but the Sarge! Or rather, let's not just now.

WASTE OFS PACE
by Tom Pace

Dear Sargie: You said it; letter hacks come and go, but the Sarge goes on forever. Well, here's one letter-hack who came, went, and is coming back. He hopes.

Aside from my bewilderment at how you manage to put such delightful ladies on your covers, I have little to say about the cover.

On the other hand, I have a great deal to say about DARK WORLD. I am writing to say that, in my august opinion, Henry Kuttner has reached a stature in the field of imaginative fiction which equals Abraham Merritt's. They said that there would never again be a writer like AM. They were wrong. I'll class DARK WORLD with anything Merritt ever wrote, except possibly—just possibly—SHIP OF ISHTAR.

The Merritt style is there, and the Merritt magic. But it is Kuttner, pure Kuttner . . . and it is great fantasy. Better than SWORD OF TOMORROW, just as SWORD OF TOMORROW was greater than LAND OF TIME TO COME, and that greater than earlier yarns . . . and this shows all the signs of keeping up for a long, long time! It seems that Kuttner is bringing on a "Golden age" in fantasy . . . all by himself!

Skoal!

Jack Vance returns with a neatly done tale of space piracy, very polished and neat indeed. And the hero is as enthusiasticly a pirate as the villain. Hooray!

EXTRA EARTH is typical of the "new" Ross Rocklynne. It could so easily be an extremely tired, hackneyed tales . . . but is anything but. Darned good.

THE MAN WITH X-RAY EYES, while quite a good yarn for its time, belongs in a 1946 stf mag exactly as much as a Ford "tin goose" belongs on a modern airline.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE has been written exactly four thousand three hundred and eighty-two times.

The pix for DARK WORLD were the best in the ish. Who did them, oh editor? They remind me of Lawrence.

And as for the blurb on Jack Vance's tale . . . per-

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sonally, I'd say that Robert Holderlin was the only card-holder in that game. The most admirable buccaneer I've run into in stf, he had the deck stacked pretty much to suit himself. Simon Templar himself couldn't have done better.

Speaking of the Saint, I recently ran across a Saint-collection of stf stories from TWS, under the name of "Impossible Crime." I note that Charteris' opinion of TROPHY rivalled my admiration for this . . . one of the best shorts I have ever read. And I also kick myself for not guessing Kuttner to be the author . . . hmmm.

There were *three* HK stories in that ish of TWS!!

Hey Sarge . . . wonder if you could talk Charteris into writing us an stf tale . . . with or without the Saint.

Hm?

Xeno again . . . always xeno!! Since you are a native of a world which has produced such things as cognac brandy, Jamaican rum, creme de menthe, or champagne, why must you drink stuff like that? Let me mix you a Pink Lady, Sarge . . . or an Angel's Kiss, or a *Pousse Café* . . . I bet you'll never drink xeno again . . . !

To repeat . . . Hank Kuttner is certainly making up for service-spent time!

There was Larry O'Keefe . . . and one called Lakla the Handmaiden. There was Leif Langdon-Dwayanu, and Evalie, and Lur the Witch-Woman. There were Kenton and Sharane of the Ship . . . and those are things that will be written of no more, worlds that are lost, for he who wrote is no more. . . .

But now there is Bond-Ganelon, and Medea, and Arles . . . *and there will be others!*

I am waiting to read of them.

Do thou, oh editor, perceive the hint?—*Brewster, Florida.*

The hint has already been took. Watch for LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE, Tom, in the issue after next—and more are coming!

Trying to bring Leslie the C into stf is a great deal like a bread rationer ordering baker's yeast not to rise. He does as he pleases and always has. And putting the Saint into a time-machine would be a little like having a plumber start out with his tools. It simply isn't done.

However, thanks for the letter. We like it.

BRIEF BRIEF FROM BELTON
by Joe Hayhurst

Dear Sergeant: Just a line to let you know that I thought "The Dark World" was really swell. It reminded me of Merritt's "Creep Shadow Creep." A story like that is really refreshing after some of the hack that we wade through.

I see where a guy named Wellman is writing a Captain Future story. Seems like everybody is writing about Captain Future. Think I'll write one too.

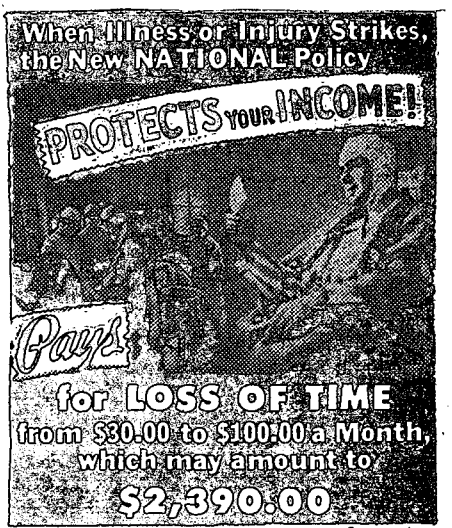
"The Vicious Circle" and "Planet of the Black Dust" were also very nice and I'm looking forward to "After Armageddon."

The cover was all right, but it wasn't what it could be. If Mr. Bergey wouldn't try to make his covers so blinding and a little more artful you would have a better cover. The girl on the cover (I assume it was Arles) wasn't much like the same in the story, but I've gotten used to such discrepancies.

Sarge, is the S-F League dead? And if it isn't why doesn't it do something?—*Belton, Texas.*

The Science Fiction League is indeed inactive at present. And don't worry about Wellman—he can go with the best of them. Am cutting this reply short because another poem looms ahead and the Sarge needs all his mental muscle to cope with same.

[*Turn page*]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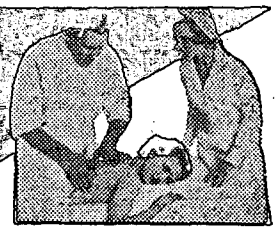

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WE BRING IT OUT

by (Miss) Lee Budoff

Dear Sarge: I don't know what you've got that does it, but you seem to bring out the poet in STF fans. I feel, after gazing at one of Mr. Bergey's colorful creations, that I must try my hand at it. Therefore, I present a poem upon a subject dear to the hearts of all of us.

The Bem (With apologies to Hilaire Belloc)

Earl Bergey's covers can be seen
On "Startling Stories" magazine,
His heroines with flaming tresses
Wear Nature's clothing for their dresses,
Red-suited heroes eye their stems,
Their weapons spitting death at Bems,
Ah Bems! Those legendary ones
Expressly made for heroes' guns,
Their jointed tongues that lie beneath
A hundred curious rows of teeth;
Their seven tufted tails with lots
Of lovely pink and purple spots,
Their eyes bulge out like telescopes
On stalks that look like slimy ropes;
And Bergey, one who ought to know,
Assures us that they're really so.
(Perhaps he's seen his darlings frolic
In nightmares wild and alchoholic)
Oh let us gaze in raptured awe
At Bems that Bergey swears he saw!

That's enough about that, but speaking more seriously, when I see what's becoming of some other STF mags on the market, I cling with relief to Startling, which has the distinction of retaining a consistently level quality and style as far as fiction is concerned. But whatever is wrong with it, I say STF forever! As long as some people have some imagination, it will always be popular.—*987 Schenectady Avenue, Brooklyn 3, New York.*

With such a perfect hunk of verse
You drive the Sarge from bad to worse
In very truth it do seem blest
With everything but Anapest
With Assyrians wolfiing the fold by the way
And Byron succeeded by Edna St. Vincent Millay
The Ode to BEMry speaking casually
Is Keat's urn in lapis lazuli
For BEMs in all scientifiction
May not be noted for their diction
Yet stand they solid like a rock
With no apologies to Hilaire Belloc.
So dress the Sarge in fine spondee
To meet this lady from Avenue Schenectady.

Brother!

WHERE IS JOKE?

by Jim Kennedy

Dear Sarge: Is Bergy nuts? He put out a good cover for once. There were a few screwy items about the Summer cover, but it was fair. Certainly better than the one on the March Issue. I thought that the type of gun that shot smoke rings was reserved for Captain Future. As for the girl herself, not a bad shape; but that two-piece bathing suit with the Robin Hood cap and the Veronica Lake hair style sort of spoiled things. Otherwise the cover was good except for those trees if that's what you call them.

The Dark World was fair but it was one of Kuttner's best. The hall of fame classic, "The Man With The X-Ray Eyes" was fair but not up to par for Edmond

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Hamilton He can do better than that. The short stories rate as follows; Planet Of The Black Dust . . . A-1, Extra Earth . . .A-2, The Vicious Circle . . . 4-F.

I don't know why I keep writing to you. I never get any of my letters published. It seem that you have a grudge on the name Kennedy, Sarge! But as I read The Ether Vibrates I see that at least one Kennedy is getting the breaks, as Joe Kennedy blasts his way back after a long absence. Also there is the usual toot from Gabriel.

I see that Captain Future is coming back next issue. But, What's this! I thought that Captain Future was strictly a Edmond Hamilton-Brett Sterling publication. How come Manly Wade Wellman is taking over this issue? Speaking of the story, enough is enough! Captain Future has beaten Ul Quorn twice and yet we find Ul Quorn still alive and fighting. Well at least lets do away with him this issue?

Speaking of Captain Future, when is he going to quit wandering in and out S.S. and get back in his own magazine. And if any the readers have any Capt. Future mags for sale. Let me know. I need all Captain Future Magazines except The Magician Of Mars, The Lost World Of Time, Magic Moon, and Days Of Creation.—*Summit City, California.*

Thanks for your interest in the ever-intrepid Curt Newton and his satellites, Jim. And, incidentally, what gives with "The Dark World was fair but it was one of Kuttner's best"? A wolf remark if ever we heard one. Please elucidate. And at any rate, you crashed into print this time. Good letter too.

AH, VERONICA!

by Robert K. Pavlat

Dear Sarge: Pardon me Sarge, but since when has Veronica Lake been appearing on the cover of *Startling*? The body, the face, the red hair didn't belong to Veronica, but the hair-do was hers. That finished, let's compare the girl in the story and the girl on the cover. ". . . a girl, in a tunic the color of earth and forest. Her black hair swung upon her shoulders." At least that's how Mr. Kuttner described her.

Sarge, if you *insist* on keeping Bergey as your cover artist, and if Bergey insists upon painting his covers without reading the story, can't you at least change the story so that it describes the girl that Bergey has decided would look nice on the cover?

You asked for a decision as to the life expectancy of Wart-ears, Snaggle and Frogeyes, so here it is. In many long years of reading *Startling* I have become more or less immune to the charms of your three hateful little monstrosities, so just tone them down somewhat. I think we'd all miss the boys if they were entirely removed from the scene, but they do deserve a rest.

Seeing that a general clean-up is forthcoming, how about fixing up your covers? I like women as well as you and Bergey do, but how can a man appreciate them when they're painted in the hybrid colors that Bergey uses? A space-ship cover would be appreciated, as would a few covers by new artists. How about getting the artist that did the drawings for "The Dark World" to do a cover or two? His drawing on page 11 was darn good, wonder who he is?

As for the stories in the July issue of *Startling*, I'll just list them in order of preferance, no remarks added. "The Dark World;" "The Vicious Circle;" "Extra Earth;" "The Man with the X-Ray Eyes;" and "The Planet of the Black Dust." Pretty bad pickings this time, all except "The Dark World" were poor.

That seems to cover almost everything except "The Ether Vibrates," which was in pretty good shape this time. Speaking of "The Ether Vibrates" brings to mind Mr. Joe Kennedy. I'm going out Pluto way before long, and if I can find his frozen body out there I'll bring it back and set it up to show people what happens to bad poets. If I can't find his body I'll stop liking his letters and poetry.—*6001 Forty-third Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland.*

[*Turn page*]

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We like space-ships too, Brother Parlat, but not as well as pretty women—in pictures anyway. And if you find Kennedy, tell him all is forgiven and for the love of Pete to write us some more of his inimitable inanity.

KIDDING, HE SAYS!

by Lin Carter

Dear Sarge: Faster than a speeding rocket; more powerful than a Jovian dinosaur; able to leap tall stories in a single bound . . . it's the GREEN GRULZAK!!

Yes, the Green Grulzak, who is in reality, mild mannered little Haversham Cringenagle, avenger of injustice, crusher of crime and tyranny, and pants pressed while you wait!

As we last left the Green Grulzak, he was facing his arch-enemy, Ul-Corn. The Green Grulzak speaks: "Aha!," he observes coyly. Well, that's all for now fellows and gurrls—but listen in tomorrow for Chapter 4 "Deadly Dungeons of Dire Despair" (all this front stuff is merely a steal on the Blue Bem).

But honest, Sarge, to get down to brass tacks, this ish was one of the best you've ever had. And so, without further ado, let's sashay forward to. . . .

THE DARK WORLD:—.50

Magnif! Superb! Hyper! One of the five best stories ever in Startling, in my estimation. Hank does, as you say, write similar to Merritt.

THE MAN WITH X-RAY EYES:—.10

Ed. Hamilton (mah ideal) is not quite at his best here, I'm sorry to say.

PLANET OF THE BLACK DUST:—.13

Pretty good! It reminded me of old-time stf-and the pic was excellent.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE:—.7

Fair. I kinda liked the idea. It would have made a swell novel.

EXTRA EARTH:—.2

The story was, in words of endearing charm, foul.

THE ETHER VIBRATES—

Pretty fair. Chad Oliver; Mildred Grimes; Howard Gabriel; Joe Kennedy etc. helped a lot. Speaking of JoKennedy: thanks for the kind comments, Joe, coming from you it's a real compliment.

A Cap Future in the next ish, eh? Swell! What? . . . by Manly Wade Wellman! What's wrong with Hamilton?

And so my ire has risen (Gad! what a vocabulary!) and I have cooled it with a poem—Sarge! stop screaming!

Sargeant Saturn, you're a louse!
An Xeno—guzzling souse!
I say to Ghu with you,
Warty, Froggy, Snaggy, too.

Sargeant, you should be in fetters,
You didn't print my last two letters.
For this there is no excuse
Unless your brains are slightly loose!

So Sarge, you may soon expect
An Atom Bomb to come collect!
(The End)

'Course I'm just kidding, Sarge. I believe I speak for all Fandom when I say that I certainly want you to continue as you always have (I pause to wipe away a reminiscent tear).

Well, that's all this time, Sarge. Keep up the good work! And remember, Sargeant Saturn spelt backwards is: tnaegraS nrutaS . . . no OTHER space-dog can make that statement!—*865—20th Ave. So., St. Petersburg, Fla.*

Your epithets fail to apply
Unto a Sarge who's wholly dry
If your epistles failed to make
the contents of this charivari
We steadfastly refuse to quake

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When you do elevate Old Harry.
You cannot vaporise Sarge Sat
For he's a radioactive cat
So keep your atom bombs at home
And *never* pen another pome.
And let us tell you, 'tis a fack
Lin Carter backward's Nil Retrac.

Again, brother! Or better yet, make it BROTHER!!!

WE WIGGLE OUR ERAS

by John Cockroft

Dear Sarge: At least a new era in Science Fiction is at hand. One of your competiters brashly made this claim a little over a year or so ago. It seems however that it was his own personal claim; his and a bunch of crackpots who "Remembered Lemuria". That so called new era could hardly pass under the guise of STF.

But enough of this. I didn't write in to start up this joker all over again. You know all about it already. The real reason for this note is to express my heart felt thanks to you for printing the Dark World in the latest ish of Startling. I believe that I can say with all sincerity and truthfullness that I have never come across another novel that has held me in the thralls of suspense and interest as this.

You are fully right (for my money, at least) in stating that Kuttner has taken up where the late Abe Merritt left off. His style and quality is definitely comparable to the late master of the genre; that is to a certain point. A closer inspection shows considerable originality, both in thought and in style and characterization, on the part of Kuttner. To shorten the matter, let us say that what Merritt did for fantasy, Kuttner is now doing for STF.

If he does only half as well in the future I will be more than satisfied. Only now I will think twice before I slap the name of classic upon a story.

I feel that in the "New Era," the trend will be towards finer writing techniques and new methods of presentation, rather than an effort on the editor's part to cause sensationalism by claiming that fiction which was written as fiction is in reality the truth. At least it is my ferverent hope that this will be so.—*4 Winship Avenue, San Anselmo, California.*

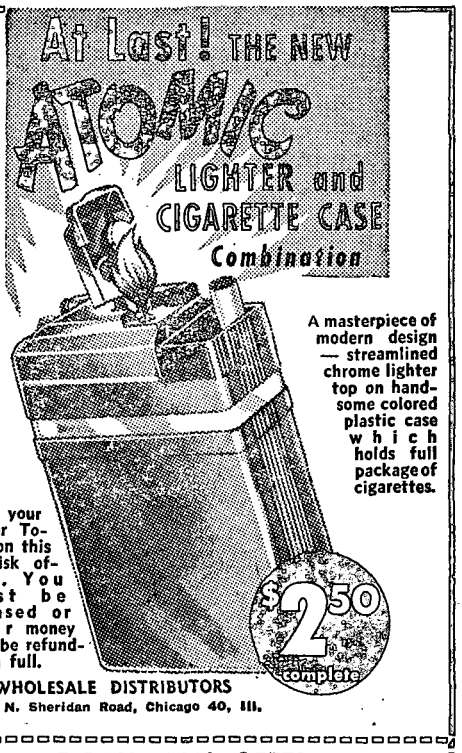
The "new era" Mr. Cockroft mentions was announced by the Sarge after a squint at stories ahead—a long way ahead. They seemed to him so far superior to many run in the last few years that he should, I believe, be pardoned for giving vent to a hallelujah or six. Or six and seven-eighths. At any rate, he is glad one more agrees on the Kuttner opus. Selah!

THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP

by Fred Ross Burgess

Dear Saturn, old Sarge: I got the Summer *Startling* today, and as Joe says: (Quote.) Humph! (Unquote.) As usual the first thing I saw was the cover. (As usual, he says!) It was quite Startling. In fact, it wasn't down to the usual standard. Really Startling. About the only thing wrong with it was all the writing scrawled all over the pretty picture. Really, all the low-class people who don't like Bergey's work, can shut up now. I'm not even going to raise a fuss about the way the girl was dressed. Henry said she was dressed in green, and he didn't specify whether it (The green stuff) was brief 'n bra, or a Mother Hubbard. (I'm glad he didn't. The picture looks better like it is.) But Sir Bergey did cross up Kuttner's de-

[*Turn page*]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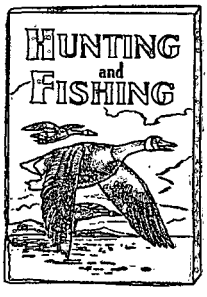

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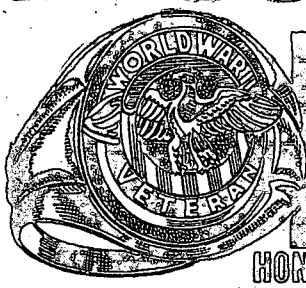

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scription of Bond. I quote: Clad as I was, in *tunic* and *trunks*. UnK.

Right now I'd like to state that I've formed a new fan club, dedicated to all cover artists. The name is The G. A. G. O. O. F. W. H. S. H. A. H. G. A. W. N. H. A. T. C. T. M. O. T. C. W. Translated into plain English, and believe you me, it's hard to do, that means The Grand and Glorous Order Of Fen Who Have Stopped Hollerin' About Heroine's Garments And Who Now Holler About The Clothes The Men On The Cover Wear. Any person wishing to join will receive membership by sending me one of the models Bergey uses to do his cover maids, and by return mail, you will receive Earle Bergey, himself, signed by both Sarge Saturn, three Bems, and Y'rs Truly.

A gripe. Why can't all the writers get together on this Captain Future stuff. In one ish you kick out of space a planet smaller than the moon, and its loss will make the sun explode, and in another you're going to get rid of the moon, and as far as you've stated, nothing'll happen.

Another gripe, not quite so large. In the fall ish you had a little thing called "The Dark Angel." In the Spring episode there was another that went under the gentle name of "The Dark Planet." Now in the Summer Installment you bring up a thing called "The Dark World." (Gets Dark early this time of year, doesn't it?) Whatsamattah? Are we in a rut, er somethin'? Maybe next time you might have something called "The Dark Sun," or "The Dark Universe", or "The Dark StFan." I quit!

The next thing I can think about here: Those interior decorations by Verne Stevens, beoteeful! His stuff may have points that I've a minor dislike for, and stuff that I usually try to keep out of my work (Types of shading.), but on the whole he is excellent.

The man with X-Ray Eyes is just another HoF classic that aint so classic. If these HoF stories are the best published back when, I'm glad I only started a few years ago. Gad, it must o' been terrible to have to read the things. And Hamilton has improved about 3300% since this. . . .this so-called "classic" was written. I like Ed's stuff a lot, but please don't spoil what fun I get out of reading his stories by printing such stuff as this.

Jack Vance brings up Planet of The Black Dust for my inspection, now. Hm-m-m. Ham! This thing has a surprise ending, and unless you read, and think out every word, the darn thing slips by you, and you have to reread the whole story to see what you missed, and I'm not going to do that!

Naxt!

Vicious circle. It seems that we are having a vicious circle with all these reincarnation stories. Incidentally, I got hold of a copy of Star-Rover the other day, and I assure you, it was the biggest disappointment or one of the biggest, I've ever had. I thought it would at least be interesting.

Now I'll pick the order in which the stories rank. In this case they're scored on a percentage basis. Best story gets highest perecentage, worst—lowest. Now. . . .

Title	Author	Place	Percentage
The Dark World	Kuttner	1.	45%
Extra Earth	Rockylynne	2.	33%
Planet of the Black Dust	Vance	3.	12%
Vicious Circle	Cross	4.	07%
Man With X-Ray Eyes	Hamilton	5.	07%

Next I'll give my pic of pix. Same method.

Page	Artist	Place	Percentage
9.	Stevens	1.	35%
15.	Stevens	2.	25%
11.	Stevens	3.	17%
70.	Stevens	4.	11%
88.	Marchioni	5.	06%
79.	Marchioni	6.	04%
63.	Marchioni	7.	02%

And the little cut on page 4 (Contents.) would have gotten about 20% if it had been in the judging, while the one on page 61 might have gotten 17%.

Now, going from the humorous to the ghastly, we find such various feeturz as the Ethereal Vibrations.

NO! NO! NO! Sarge. . . . DON'T EVER LEAVE US! PLEASE!

This is a paid political announcement, and does not necessarily constitute the views of this station.

But no, we do need some humor in this peace-ravaged world. And don't ever bung the Xeno kegs.

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What would us poor fellows here on Earth do. The most potent stuff we can get here is only about 199 and ¾ proof. Good old repulsive 7792½ proof Xeno. Of course you realize that I don't offer definite proof, but Xeno does.

Joe Kennedy says he died on Pluto. The ungrateful wretch! May his pet grulzaks leave him, and never return. HE DIED ON PLUTO? The idea. As he was staggering in the snow I saw him, and just as he fell I wheeled about on my run between U Ophiuchi and Krueger 60. Before a quarter of an hour had gone by I was at his side, forcing life-giving Xeno down his friz throat, and in a few moments his heart (He DOES have one, y'know.) started beating again. I carried him to my cruiser, and then, although he never quite regained consciousness, I carried him on past Earth, (At that time I didn't think that anything that looked like that could be human.) past Krueger 60, and on the Galaxy I. C. 1613, roughly 1,000,000 light years from our Galaxy, and some 300,000 past Andromeda.

On one of the major planets there they refused to claim him, so on my trip back, to N. G. C. 6822, incidentally, I left him off on the little planet of Kypton, where the natives found him, took pity on him and me, took him off my hands, and raised him. I went on the N. G. C. 6822, and at present, and future, and coming back to the Galaxy via the Magellanic Clouds. At present, I'm only 120,000 light years from Earth, so if this letter gets here late, well? And this is the reason they never found Josephus Q. Kennedy's body on the sunny planet of Pluto.

Now Joke will probally claim that this ain't, but he doesn't know, due to the fact that he was a trifle delirious during most of the voyage.

I have solved the problem that bothered so many readers. I know just which case Dave Grant opened. He opened one and found his wife in it and she opened the other one, and found herself in it. She was in both cases. Does that answer Mrs. Bowling's query?

And for that Sirius fellow Mikeal Kook, send him two gallons of Xeno viniger, famed for its etc, with my compliments. I did like that crack.

Sirius buznez. Tch.

Make it three gallons.

Incidentally, I lost Ron Maddox's new address. Let me know, Ron.

And Sarge, old pal, old friend, old Xeno hogshead, why not please have the amateur story contest back. I've got a couple of nifties here. And why not have an amateur art contest.- Not just drawings of ye S., but assorted StF stuff. And with your Meet the author, please print the picture of the bird. I thank you, and remains, as usual, Y'r Obedient Servant.—*115 Aycock, Chapel Hill, N. C.*

P. S. If there are any fans in North Carolina, would you please get in touch with me at the above address, or Andy Lyon at 200 Williamsboro St., Oxford, N. C. If you even read StF you'll do. You don't have to be an actifan, just so you read StF. Y'see, we're trying to form a statewide organization of fans and fannes in North Carolina to give StF a wider range in the Old North State, and generally improve fen conditions here. A postal card will do, and we'll write you a nice long letter explaining everything, so please, PLEASE let us hear from you. We'd like to have over a hundred members by Christmas. *Please!* For the sake of Fandom, and North Carolina Fandom in particular.

No comment, except to tell Br'er Burgess that if he has a couple of yarns, send them in for the Sarge to practise basketball with. He doesn't bounce them—he dribbled them.

Which brings to a close one of the longest vibrations in SS history. Keep the letters in the mail and the Sarge under full sail. And never mind what that is, son. Incidentally, where are all the femme fens? Only one, Lee Budoff, in the issue. The Sarge doesn't bite —much. So write him.

Farewell until the next issue.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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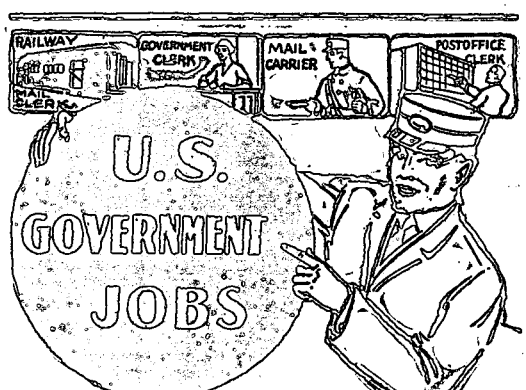

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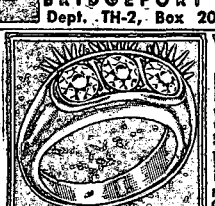

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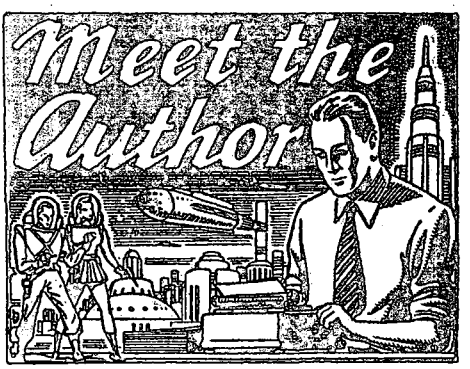

AUTHOR Edmond Hamilton may prate of the creation of "wonder" in his novel, THE STAR OF LIFE, but to us he is chiefly the creator of a brand new caste system guaranteed to drive any follower of Karl Marx to the shores of the nearest cocoanut-shaded island to find a mate—among the fruits of the trees.

This business of whole new species of humanity might well have caused the late Thomas Jefferson, apostle of human equality, to lift his bi-focals gently from his proboscis, hurl them to the floor and stamp on them as if he were treading grapes in the vineyard of Monticello.

Hamilton—no fool he—ducks the issue neatly in his comment on the story, but his remarks anent other phases of his excellent fable are interesting. Says Mr. Hamilton.

THE STAR OF LIFE, like most of my science-fiction stories, is a story of "wonder". I put the word between quotation marks because I would like to define what I mean by it.

The quality of wonder has largly disappeared from modern literature. But centuries ago, when much of the world was still unexplored, it was the breath of life to tale-tellers.

It was the emotion aroused by speculation on the unknown regions and their possible marvels. Beyond the rim of the horizon lay dreamy continents and isles of enchantment—at least, they *might* be there.

The old Greek literature is full of that fascination of the unknown, from Odysseus' magic islands and Plato's Atlantis down to Strabo's mammoth geography of mythical countries. The Celts brooded on fairy lands in the western sea, the Arab story-tellers affirmed a jinn-haunted world lay beyond the desert, and even the Spanish explorers firmly believed in fabled golden cities.

All that has faded as the surface of Earth has become completely known and the last mysteries exposed. But there is no reason why it should be so. Out in space lies a vastly larger and even more mysterious realm for the imagination to play in.

Even the planets of our own star-system are still largely unsolved mysteries, though we can deduce some facts about their physical conditions. But concerning the planets of other stars, we know absolutely nothing. The wildest

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and most fantastic speculations may well be true on worlds out there.

Even when man finally makes the traverse to another star, as seems inevitable someday in view of recent scientific progress, there will always be vast regions of mystery and romance in the almost infinite extent of our galaxy. What I have called "wonder" will come back into its own then, and I should like to hear some of the strange tales that will be afloat then about far-off and unvisited stars.

Because the most deep-rooted myth in the human tradition is that of a golden Elysium where age and death are unknown, I am sure that in that day there will be tales of a fabled star or world of immortality, just as the old Celts dreamed of an Island of Life in the western ocean.

Thinking of that, it occurred to me that most of the old fables about such a golden elysium had generally a tragic twist to them. In the case of the Celts, the catch in their Island of Life was that man remained immortal on it, but was not immune to sickness or age, and these in time so weighed upon him that he was glad in the end to leave the isle of immortality and sail to the Island of Death.

If the star-explorers of the future ever found such a star or world of immortality, would they too find that it had a catch to it? That was the idea that led me to write THE STAR OF LIFE.

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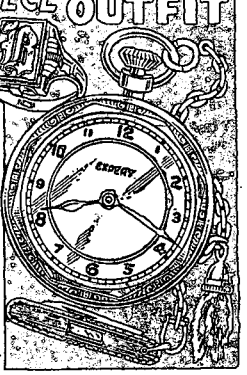

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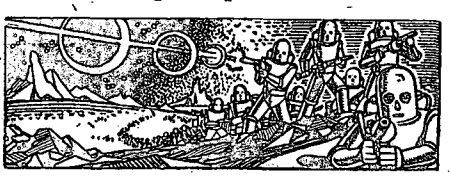
REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

By

SERGEANT SATURN

GEORGE FOX, the Jersey fanatic, is very much in the local news this issue with a notice to New York Metropolitan area fandom, soliciting membership in a new and enlarged society designed to promote bigger if not better swap-and-breeze shoots. Those interested can make connections by dropping him a line at 460 Orchard Street, Rahway, New Jersey. We're all for it.

Also deserving of special mention is the



Pacificonvention booklet published by Walt Daugherty of 1305 West Ingraham, Los Angeles 14, California. Although the convention has come and gone, the booklet lingers on—and is as good a piece of typography as any that has stemmed from the Daugherty press to date. E. E. Evans seems to have taken a stranglehold on most of the by-lines, but without detriment to the magazine.

Pegasus Publications of 123 Edna Place, Buffalo, New York, advertises a something called I AM CAESAR by Dorothy C. Pyle ($2.50). Pegasus will need wings to keep up with the Providence gang when it comes to STF book publication. Here's hoping they make it.

Only other item that rates a preliminary plug is a magazine entitled SPACE FLIGHT . . . WHEN?, put out by Gerry de la Ree of 9 Bogart Place, Westwood, New Jersey (busy little B's, these Jersey fans, n'est-ce pas?). Everyone of the 67 fans, authors, editors et cetera consulted on the matter of space flight allowed it a rapid future—save for the unfortunate Ray Palmer, who apparently was and is ag'in the whole concept.

Most of the consultees had man taking off into the vast areas beyond the ether by 1950 or so. As a dividend, de la Ree included his Beowulf poll in the issue, with a majority of fans ready to launch themselves for heaven knows where at the drop of an atom bomb.

The A List is in good strength this time out, with eleven magazines crashing the charmed circle. So let's get at it. There are

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a number of old timers and a couple of neophytes in the upper case roster (quiet, Walt Liebscher, quiet, I say).

Heading the list as usual is THE ACOLYTE, and heading it in more ways than one. We'll tee off on it first.

THE ACOLYTE, 1005 West 35th Street, Los Angeles 7, California. Co-edited by Francis T. Laney and Samuel D. Russell. Published quarterly, 25c per copy or five issues $1.00.

Behind an excellent cover by William Rotsler, Messers Laney and Russell have emerged with another fine edition, up to and including a rather cornily bizarre bit of verse entitled "Vampire's Lullaby" by the ubiquitous Tigrina. The Sarge was especially interested in an article by James Sandoe about the currently all too-little-known Richard Harris Barham, author of the "Ingoldsby Legends."

THE FANEWS, 1443 Fourth Avenue South, Fargo, North Dakota. Editor, Walter Dunkelberger. 2c per sheet or 55 for $1.00.

Dunk has really gone to town with his THIRD FANEWS ANNUAL, thus moving up into the A List with the creme de la creme. He has put so much in the way of extra pages in the beginning that the reader feels as if he had read a book before he attains the magazine itself—but it's entertaining reading, so where's the harm? Harold Bertram contributes a riotous description of the South Bixel Street manic depressives which adds spice to this newsiest and most gossipy of fanzines.

FANTASY COMMENTATOR, 19 East 235th Street, New York 66, New York. Editor, A. Langley Searles. 20c per copy, 6 issues $1.00.

Despite a chronic tendency to be a little weighty and a bit on the undergraduate thesis there is plenty of meat in this one. And Sam Moskowitz's monumental history of STF runs on and on and on. The book reviews are excellent.

FANTASY ADVERTISER, 628 South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Gus Willmorth. Published quarterly. 2½c per copy or five issues for 10c.

Something new in the fanzine world, being mostly a listing of book and prozine sales in the Los Angeles district (from Seattle to baja California). Printed in tip-top form, this publication should fill a long-felt want for fanswappers.

FIVE FINGERS—THE GLORY HAND, 628 South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Francis T. Laney. Price unlisted.

This rather routine one-shot is enlivened by Laney's dialectic ire at Walter J. Burbee. Apparently Burbee was to help get the 'zine out, but preferred sitting under Iowans of Palm trees or whatever they have in Los Angeles, thus causing his colleague to foam at the mouth. Ah, feuds—will they never cease?

THE GROTESQUE, 1870 East 33d Street, Brooklyn 10, New York. Editor, Ron Christensen. Published quarterly. Price 10c per copy.

Joe Kennedy explains how he got that way and Bob Tucker handles the lead book review in a very sprightly fanzine further enlivened by Perry, Maddox and Streiff. Despite a lamentable tendency to lampoon the Sarge, it is a gay, informative and entertaining 'zine.

SCIENTIFICTIONIST, 13618 Cedar Grove, Detroit 5, Michigan. Editor, Henry Elsner Jr. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, three copies 25c.

Greenleaf sounds off on Charles Fort, Evans has praise for illustrators Cartier, Bok and Finlay and ye editors give ye Sarge a pat on the pate for moving the gremlins out of his columns and back to Ganymede. This is one of the better among the newer 'zines. A big full dime's worth.

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Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Charles Burbee. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy or three copies 25c or six copies 50c.

Back in Burbee's competent veteran hands, this house organ of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society is regaining much of its pristine lustre. It still goes in for thoroughly wacky fiction, but Tigrina's minutes of the LASFS perk up it no end. Good sport.

THE STAR ROVER, 5175 Kensington Avenue, St. Louis 8, Missouri. Editor, Van Splawn. Published quarterly. 10c per copy or four issues 35c.

An interesting and colorful hunk of printing with most of the regulars, from Tucker to Ackerman, contributing. If some Sherlock Holmes would reveal the true identity that lurks behind the name Rollo J. Quid, we should sleep a whole lot more easily.

VAMPIRE, 84 Baker Avenue, Dover, New Jersey. Editor, Joe Kennedy. Published irregularly. 10c per copy or three issues for 25c or twelve issues for $1.00.

Kennedy takes a healthy wallop at prozines in his inimitable fashion and, as if that weren't enough, allows Shaver to try to make sense out of his "deros" or what have you.

VOM, Box 6475 Metro Station, Los Angeles 55, California. Editor, Forrest J. Ackerman, 15c per copy or seven issues $1.00.

Still the best letterbox in fandom with an eerily snazzy cover by Rosaleen Norton. 'Nuff said.

And so—to the B List. Oddly enough it numbers just one fewer contributions as its upper-case brother—in this case ten.

AMEN, 84 Baker Avenue, Dover, New Jersey. Editor, Joe Kennedy. Distributed free of charge to ESFA members. Published irregularly. Joke takes over for de la Ree and begets himself an amusing journal.

THE COSMIC NEWS-LETTER, 101-02 Northern Boulevard, Corona, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published weekly. 5c per copy or six copies 25c. More editorial than news-letter, but no real harm is done.

LONESOME LENNY'S LEDGE NO. ONE, 123 Edna Place, Buffalo 8, New York. Editor, K. J. Krueger. Published irregularly. No price.

LUNACY, 4 Winship Avenue, San Anselmo, California. Editor, Roger Rehm or somebody like that. Published monthly. No price listed. A wild and very woolly job which contains odds and ends crammed together at the editor's whim. Lunacy is right!

THE MARTIAN NEWS LETTER, 548 North Dellrose Street, Wichita 6, Kansas. Editor, Telis Streiff. Published every 72 days. 10c per copy. Another screwball job and horribly printed.

NATIONAL FANTASY FAN, 1028 Third Avenue, South, Moorhead, Minnesota. Editor, unlisted. Published irregularly. Price unlisted. More of a trade sheet for the NFFF than a fanzine of general interest. Dunkelberger has a hand in it somewhere.

STFFM, 208½ South Michigan Street, South Bend 11, Indiana. Editor, Harley Luther Sachs. Published irregularly. No price listed. A midget-sized little mag with some very dire artwork.

SPACELING, 119 Woodland Avenue, Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Editor, Howard G. Allen. Published irregularly. No price. Editor Allen takes issue with the artwork in a certain prozine (not one of ye Sarge's, praise Allah!). He should take a good look at his own.

SQUIMF. Since Roger Rehm has omitted to list his address, we must do likewise. His 'zine is a sloppy and skimpy job with some even more-horrifying-than-usual shots of the Sarge on both covers.

THE KAY-MAR TRADER, 1028 Third Avenue, South, Moorhead, Minnesota. Editor, K. Martin Carlson. Published irregularly. No price listed. Sloppily printed intramural swap-shop house organ.

Well, people, that does it for this issue. On the whole, it represents rather a lean crop where quality is concerned. Seems to me some of you can do a lot better in the amateur publishing field. Hop to it and give the Sarge something to stand up and cheer for.

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THE STAR OF LIFE

(Concluded from page 71)

most. "You ought to kill me, Hammond. I've brought on you the same agony that I suffered years ago."

"You didn't know," Hammond said dully. "It was that old hostility that poisoned minds and caused it all, and now that's over."

Rab Quobba's big hand crushed his shoulder.

"It may not be much comfort now. But there's all the wonder of the galaxy for you to rove with me and Tammas. And you're a spaceman, one of the first of us all."

Into the paling sky as they left him, the Star of Life rose in scintillating splendor to cast its opalescent rays across the alabaster towers of Sharanna. Hammond found Iva at his side, looking up at him with tear-stained face.

He looked down at her.

"Fate is strange, Iva. I came across a hundred centuries to love the one woman I could never have."

"There is still life ahead for you, Kirk," she said, pleadingly. "And life can be good in this new universe of ours. You will forget."

He knew better. He would not forget. Down the time to come, Thayn's memory would always go with him, like a faint far strain of exquisite music. But he nodded and put his hand on her shoulder as one might soothe a child, and saw her smile tremulously up at him through her tears.

VENUS MINES, Incorporated

(Concluded from page 85)

face. He would cast a sidelong glance at his older comrade, open his mouth, close it abruptly.

"What's on your mind, Britt, out with it." Penger spoke casually, without shifting his position.

The youngster stopped short, surprised.

"Well, if you must know, Mr. Penger," he burst out. "I hate to think of those Martians slowly dying on that horrible little world. I know they're murderers and all that, but I just can't help it."

Arnim looked at him not unkindly.

"Rest your mind, Britt. As soon as we started for Ganymede I radioed the Mercurian Patrol Ship. She's on her way right now to pick them off."

"Oh."

Arnim stretched himself contentedly.

"Will I be glad to get back to old Earth, where it's peaceful and quiet!"

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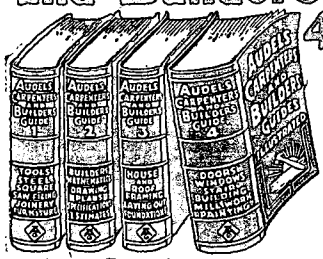

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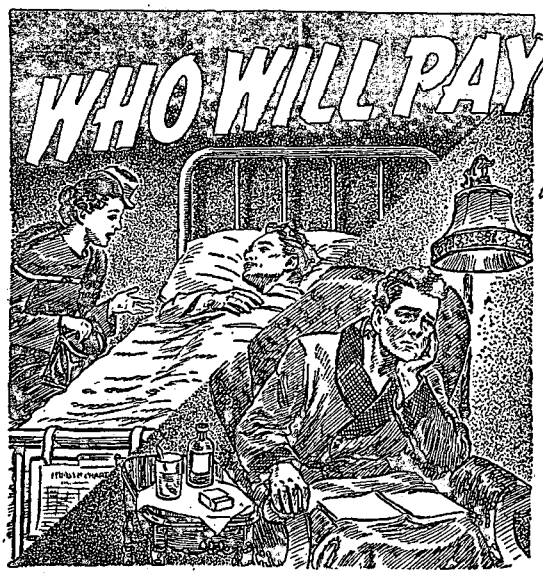

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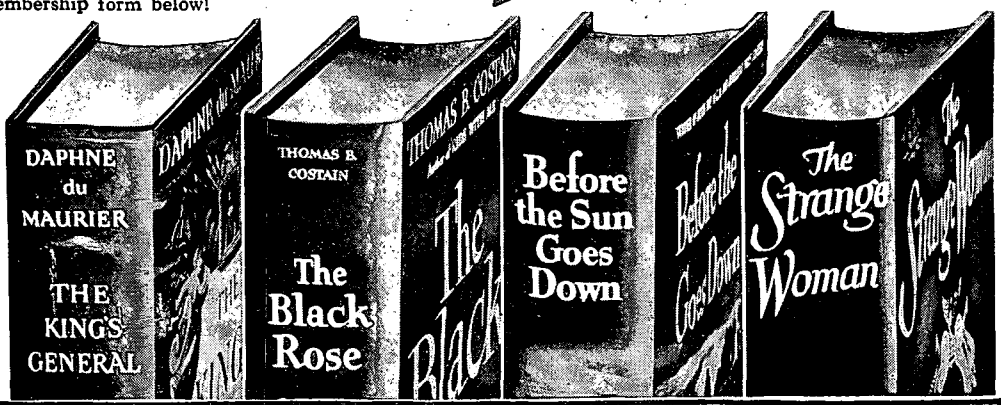

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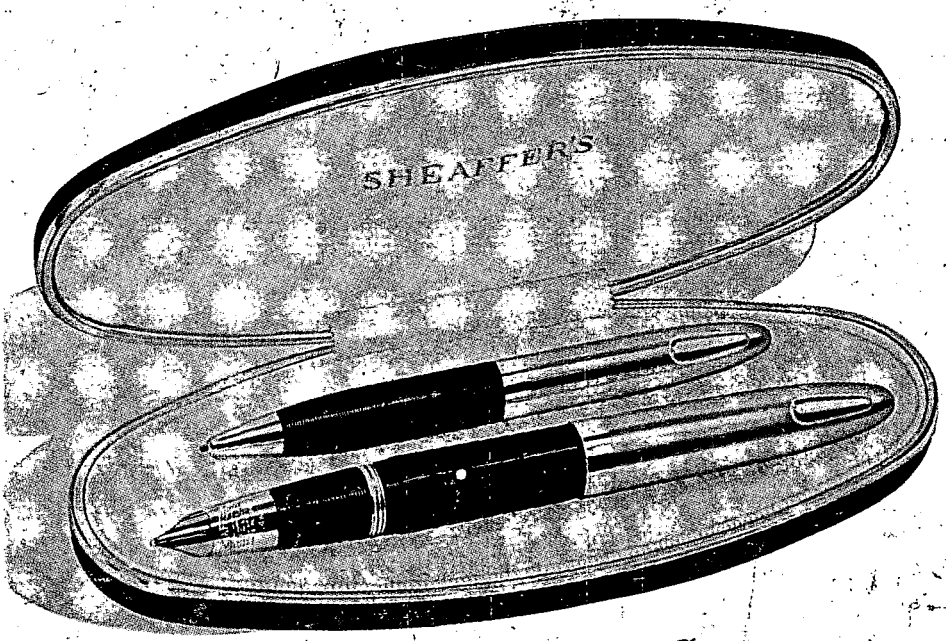

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